

# WHERE'S THE LINE?

An exploration of the behavioural barriers and drivers affecting London men from speaking up when they witness misogynistic behaviour.

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Ogilvy CONSULTING × **MAYOR OF LONDON**

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# Research Report

## Executive Summary

In continuation from the Mayor of London's 'Have a word' campaign, Ogilvy Consulting's Behavioural Science Practice were briefed by Greater London Authority (GLA) to understand what prevents and encourages male bystander intervention when they witness acts of misogyny.

To deliver on this objective, Ogilvy Consulting conducted primary and secondary research with wide sociodemographic diversity. Primary research included 15 hours of face-to-face ethnographies with London males, digital diaries from 48 men aged 13-55, social listening and sentiment analysis, as well as a survey of expert advice from the VAWG sector. Secondary research included a literature review of grey and white literature. All research was carried out between 19 September and 16 December 2022.

Secondary research and collaboration with GLA informed a set of hypotheses around men's capability, motivation and opportunity to act. These hypotheses were tested and expanded on in primary research.

### Main research insights:

- The majority of London men know what misogyny is and where it comes from
- Bystanders' tolerance of misogyny is variable and contextual
- The decision to act is a risk calculation
- Sacred group dynamics determine whether men intervene

- Bystanders are most comfortable with respectful interventions

Based on these insights, the most powerful opportunities for changing behaviour are:

1. Work with men, not against them: solicit love and respect
2. Make intervention easy and non-threatening for everyone
3. Create cultural safety at the group and society level
4. Nudge pragmatically using evidence-based approaches

Details of our research methodologies and research questions asked can be made available upon request.

Thank you,

David Fanner, Consultant  
Tope Babalola, Consultant  
Mike Hughes, Consulting Director  
Tara Austin, Executive Sponsor

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# Project Context

# Research Objectives

To understand what prevents and encourages men and boys in London from intervening when they encounter misogynistic acts.

To unearth new opportunities to motivate and enable men and boys to discourage misogynistic behaviour when they see it.



# Research Methodology

## LITERATURE REVIEW & HYPOTHESIS SETTING

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A review of 20+ peer-reviewed journals, white papers and grey literature to understand the breadth of factors associated with calling out misogyny.

Hypotheses set at this stage in partnership with Greater London Authority.

## MIXED METHODS PRIMARY RESEARCH

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### Participatory Ethnography

*Observing 12 diverse men in male dominated spaces*

- Construction workers
- Bar staff
- Male barbers
- 5-a-side football team
- City bankers

### Digital Ethnography

*288 video diaries, 37k words analysed*

- Sample: 48
- Age: 13-55
- Ethnicity: 60% white, 40% B, A and ME

### VAWG Sector Survey

*Consulted 26 experts in violence against women and girls*

### Linguistic Analysis

*21.3M words analysed to identify subtle differences in how misogyny is spoken about, and where, across:*

- Twitter
- Reddit
- Digital ethnography

## STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Synthesis

- All insights were synthesised against the COM-B behaviour change model

### Strategic Recommendations

- 5 critical insights
- 4 strategic opportunities
- Recommendations to change behaviour

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# Research Findings



# Summary of Findings

1

## **Most London men know what misogyny is and where it comes from.**

Most, but not all, of London men understand what misogyny is, know it's wrong, and believe it is rooted in bruised status and insecurity.

4

## **Sacred group dynamics determine whether men intervene.**

There exist some enduring, near-sacred aspects of the male social experience that we must acknowledge. That is, the sanctity of groups and the personal standards they hold themselves to within them.

5

## **Bystanders feel most comfortable with respectful interventions.**

When asked to describe what the most effective interventions would be for inappropriate male behaviours, participants remarked that as both a bystander and perpetrator, the most effective approach would be a respectful one that doesn't embarrass the perpetrator.

2

## **Bystanders' tolerance of misogyny is variable.**

Acceptance of, and tolerance for, misogynistic behaviour changes depending on who says/does it, where, with whom, and how.

3

## **The decision to act is a risk calculation.**

Men are more likely to intervene when witnessing acts of misogyny if the perceived risk to the victim outweighs the perceived level of personal risk, and vice versa.

# The majority of London men know what misogyny is and where it comes from.

Most, but not all of London men understand what misogyny is, know it's wrong, and believe it is rooted in bruised status and insecurity.

# Most men believe misogynistic comments are rooted in bruised status and insecurity

Our research and comments from sector stakeholders reveals a common belief that misogyny is rooted in:

- Insecurity or challenged ego
- Entitlement based on gender
- A difficulty tolerating uncomfortable emotions
- Sadistic motivation
- Peer pressure
- A desire for allies
- Poor childhood experiences

This is consistent with academic literature on status, which finds that the flipside of status, and the cause of its loss, is humiliation. Researchers have described humiliation as the 'nuclear bomb of emotions'. Most wars start after a country has lost its standing.

Our research leads us to believe that many misogynistic comments are attempts to regain or cling onto perceived lost status. Often, in response to humiliation.

This may explain why OnlyFans, women profitably selling feet pics online, and male submission came up multiple times. Some men are keenly aware of women's rising status and find it uncomfortable. They are anxious they will lose status.

To compound the issue, scientific research finds low-status individuals are more sensitive to being socially rejected.

It is therefore critical that interventions don't antagonise perpetrators, because this will likely create a reactive response.

**“They don't have a close relationship with women. So, it builds up. They view women as totally different creatures.”**

– *Tanush (Age 41)*

**“The people carrying shit saying shit.”**

– *Painter (Age 35)*

**“The people who do it are insecure. They do it to look/ feel cool.”**

– *Painter (Age 35)*

**“I think when a person is talking to a woman in that way, there are maybe some issue with childhood, I believe, because if you get the real care from a mother, they don't feel or they don't like to look at the woman like that.”**

– *Vinh (Age 39)*

# Bystanders' tolerance of misogyny is variable and contextual.

Acceptance of, and tolerance for, misogynistic behaviour changes depending on who says/does it, where, with whom, and how.

# Men excuse misogynistic behaviour from friends and family because they believe they are inherently good

**There is almost no line between humour and harm amongst male friends.**

Intent is everything. The majority of our male participants claim there is strong group trust amongst their social circles and that everyone is implicitly a good person.

Most participants understood that misogynistic comments are not acceptable, yet they believed that many of their friend's misogynistic jokes didn't reflect the true beliefs of their friends.

This study found that the majority of men believe the "line" is crossed into intended misogyny when there is:

1. A perceived victim
2. Multiple or cumulative offences
3. A detection of malice

**“There's other times where you know he is being humorous but its offensive to other groups. Within our group no one takes offense because we know he's trying to be humorous, not offensive.”**

– Nurse (Age 31)

**“If it's amongst men and we know that it's one of the guys, I've got a friend who... his wife left him and left a daughter with him. She walked out of the marriage, and he's really disliked women ever since... He continuously makes misogynistic comments because that's where he's coming from.”**

– Nurse (Age 31)

**“The thing is, if it's friends, I know the quality of the character of my friends, so I know that those things aren't true.”**

Anonymous – Age 31

**“But for me, it's when it's a constant theme and when it's really coming from the heart.”**

– Ethan (Age 24)

# Readiness to change differs by generation and culture

**Cultural Cognition research shows that when people are unsure what to believe, they defer to their worldview.**

For example, the UK is highly individualist. Our linguistic analysis tool revealed that white participants used “I” 1.2x more, and non-white participants used “We” 3x more.

One participant who grew up in a hierarchical and masculine society and felt “woke” ideals were being pushed on him and that “progress had gone too far”.

Another spoke of being accidentally offensive in the UK because he grew up in a country that rejected LGBTQ+. In order to sway these people, we must frame progress in a way that they find culturally affirming.

**Some social groups are seen as lost causes.** Participants uniformly believe that it’s harder or not worth calling out older generations. Others believed calling out online misogyny is a “waste of time” because intervention won’t change the perpetrator’s behaviour.

**Some men feel culturally left behind** Office professionals, such as city bankers, are socialised by their progressive networks, company training and D&I initiatives. Construction workers, for example, are often less exposed to ideas such as transsexuality or feminism in their workplace. These participants were often more dismissive of misogyny and other gender related issues.

**“It’s different for older generations, even the women in older generations are quiet. I won’t change how they think.”**

– Bar staff (Age 31)

**“There are Dave Chapelle jokes from 20 years ago that if I laugh at now, I would be considered a misogynist.”**

– European Controller of Equities (Age 34)

**“It gets to a point where you have to just accept they don't understand. So there's no point making a scene out of it.”**

– Bar Staff (Age 25)

**“A lot of these issues are first world problems.”**

– Painter (Age 35)

# Some men tolerate misogyny because they believe that women are just as bad

Throughout our research, we observed the unhelpful belief held by male participants that in many situations, women would act in the same way if the roles were reversed. Or, they'd join in on inappropriate banter, but be judged to a different standard.

**“She’s a few years older than him, and she rams it down his throat about being the breadwinner... and it's like she sees it as a joke but it’s an attempt at emasculation”**

– *European Controller of Equities (Age 35)*

**“Even women, they're making jokes about men from time to time behind your back. It's human nature. So, it happens all the time and you should not take it seriously.”**

– *Daniel (Age 38)*

**“And the main reason I've got a difficult time saying and speaking up about that is because very often women make those exact same sexist comments towards men. How often do we hear comments such as, “Oh, you're a man, you can't do more than one thing at a time.” Or how often do you hear, “Typical male, typical man.”**

– *Alex (Age 41)*

**“I played for football teams and there's this lad locker room kind of culture, so I think that's fair to a limit because girls do the same, they talk about men too.”**

– *Nathan (Age 31)*

# With a female present, her level of comfort sets the “line”

**This study finds that men are more likely to behave appropriately when there is a female present.**

This is because they can now see a potential victim. For example, when a mother walks into a barber shop, or a female colleague is present, conversations shift to accommodate the change in environment.

Many men remarked how if a woman is present, they would watch her reaction to inappropriate behaviour, and only intervene after she shows any signs of distress.

Ultimately, if a female is present, the female's level of comfort establishes the line. When asked to define the line, 22 of 48 men mentioned “reaction of victim” or “offended reaction” (fig 1).

If the female is joking back, no issue. However, if she is upset, then the line between harm and humour has been crossed.

Finally, through our research we observed that men are intrinsically motivated to act when reminded of the women in their lives.

**“Some women, they immediately take badly to it, then that's immediately when you've crossed the line. Some women may take it as banter, that's really where you've got to judge the person's response.”**

– *Ajamu (Age 41)*

**“We became *gentlemen* when she first joined the team.”**

– *Barber (Age 31)*

**“I always first gauge the reaction of the woman to see if she is in distress.”**

– *Waiter (Age 23)*

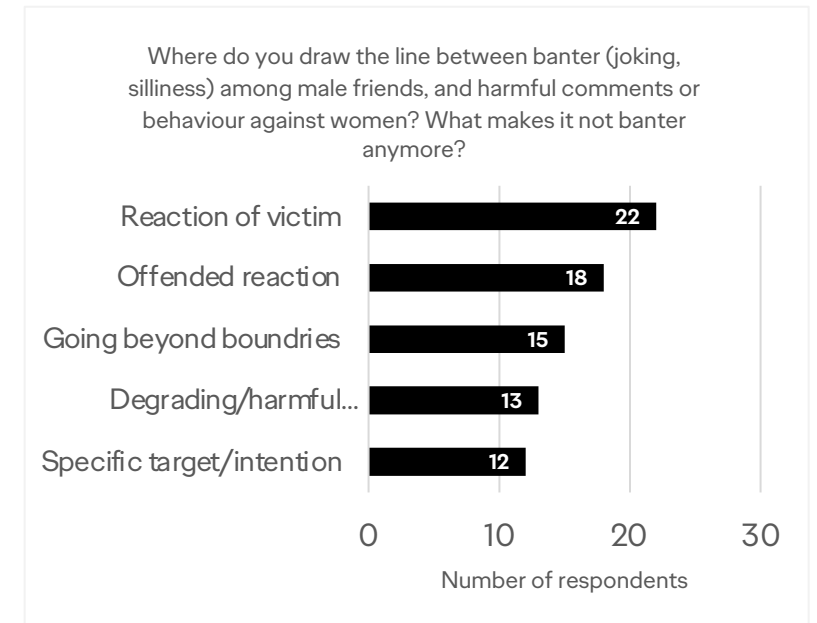


Fig 1: Video diary survey question 8. Qualitative responses are qualitatively coded by meaning.



# The decision to act is a risk calculation.

Men are more likely to intervene when witnessing acts of misogyny if the perceived risk to the victim outweighs the perceived level of personal risk, and vice versa.

# Fear of physical and psychological harm prevents men from speaking up

**Most men are motivated to act when they witness misogyny, but fear of physical and psychological harm prevents them from doing so.**

31 out of 48 participants in our video diary survey said that “Risky situation” was the most selected reason not to intervene with “Possibility of injury” a close second (fig 2).

Fear for one’s physical safety was the most important barrier to intervene by far.

Psychological safety refers to the fear of damaging one’s reputation or social standing, leading to social exclusion. In friendship groups, men don’t want to be ridiculed or labelled a “white knight”.

There is no cultural norm around calling misogyny out compared to other social issues such as racism or homophobia. This led participants to view calling misogyny out as riskier.

Based on this logic, men often hold back and observe the situation to understand the personality of the perpetrator, if unknown, before deciding to intervene and determining the method of approach.

**“I feel like racism is brought up a lot more. Misogyny is more accepted rather than challenged.”**

– Account Executive, (Age 29)

**“If there's a risk of them turning and directing their harassment towards me. So, if there's a risk of injury, physical injury towards me, then that would make me second guess whether it's a good idea to do that probably.”**

*Anonymous, (Age 31)*

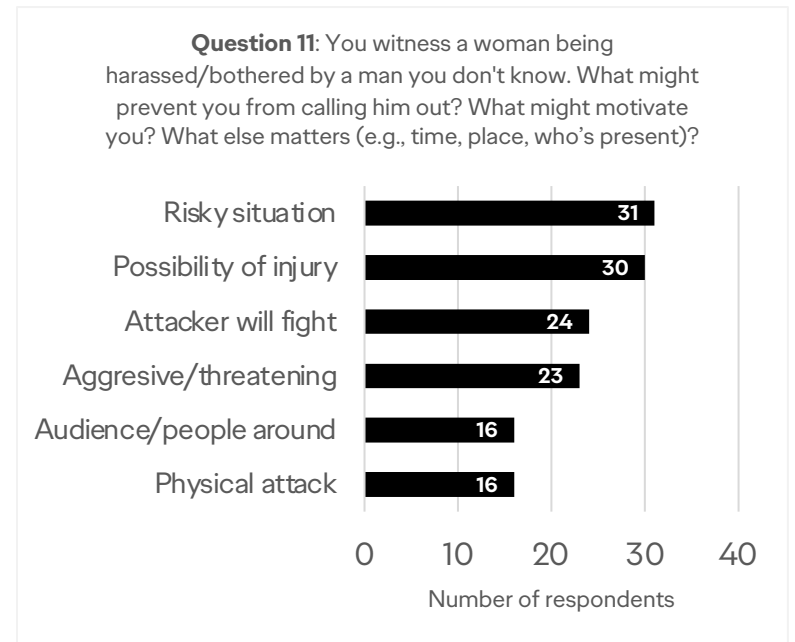


Fig 2: Video diary survey question 11: Qualitative response clustered into these using sociological coding (n = 48)

# Social hierarchies determine who can effectively call out, or who can't be called out

**In group dynamics, there are implicit hierarchies of members based on status.**

Status is determined by the group context and can be set by attributes such as strength, humour, wealth, or authority.

Those with higher status determine the implicit 'rules' of the group, and it is more difficult for those with lower status to challenge these rules.

For those that have higher status, it is easier to set and call out acts that are against the beliefs of the group (in this case misogyny). Inversely, it is harder for those with lower status to challenge dominant figures on their behaviour, primarily due to a fear of social exclusion.

This is also true in the workplace. Participants have described how it is much harder to call out a boss than a friend, or

even a stranger, because the potential downside is much higher. Similarly, men are less likely to call out misogyny if there is personal gain to be had from silence.

Through our ethnography, we learned of specific examples where group dynamics are understood and leveraged to diffuse highly emotive situations. For example, in the hospitality industry, to de-escalate situations, bartenders are trained to identify the "sensible" friend or group "leader" and ask them to appeal to the perpetrator.

**“Calling people out is an alpha thing, but not everyone can be alpha.”**

– *Swimming Instructor (Age 29)*

**“If you're the person who's questioned your boss, you're always looked at in that way as if you're a troublemaker, regardless of what you questioned your boss on. You're the troublemaker. Very big risk and a very small reward!”**

– *Accounts Assistant (Age 29)*

**“I would challenge my boss, yes, but that's only because we have a personal relationship.”**

– *Barber (Age 23)*

# **Sacred group dynamics determine whether men intervene.**

There exist some enduring, near-sacred aspects of the male social experience that we must acknowledge. That is, the sanctity of groups and the personal standards they hold in them.

# Men don't want to ruin the lightness of conversation by being the "morality police"

**Participants reported feeling unsure of how to call each other out or "killing the mood" of light-hearted conversations amongst friends.**

While most men report feeling uncomfortable when witnessing misogyny, and believe that privately others think the same, they also reported that often the most instinctive reaction to misogyny without a victim present is to "giggle and move on", hoping it's a one off. Relief quickly vanishes after multiple offences as men realise they'll have to address it.

Although laughter can often be seen to affirm what is being said, participants reported that it was used to avoid addressing what *was* said, hiding feelings of awkwardness, or merely a way to move the conversation on.

As an instinctive laugh kicks in, men report reflecting on the comment and whether they think it's true.

This gives rise to a fragile and potentially golden moment of pause.

**"I mean we're having a drink. You make a comment, whatever... everyone laughs. I am offended, and try to speak up, but clearly, everyone else found it funny. I'm gonna be the odd one out. People are going to think I'm, you know..."**

*— Accountant (Age 42)*

**"I think sometimes the whole group is too awkward to mention it, especially in England. So, it usually just gets buried under the carpet."**

*— Chris, (Age 31)*

**"I laughed at first, then I told him off."**

*— Barber (Age 25)*

# Men won't intervene in others' relationships because it's "not their business"

**In most public settings, as observed in our ethnographic research, men tend to keep a respectful distance from others' business.** Tables won't interact in the pub, except at the bar. Friend groups leave other friend groups alone.

Several men we interviewed specifically mentioned that they don't get involved if they see a (male-female) couple arguing.

Other reasons participants wouldn't step in:

- Men may be aware/unaware of the background or reasons to the incident, and in some cases, men may side with other men: "maybe she deserves it"
- The bystander effect – assumption that others will step in
- Online intervention is the sole

responsibility of online platforms; many tagged covid misinformation in the past

- Normatively, a staff member doesn't have the right to intervene in a customer's disagreement. One barber spoke of two Irish friends talking offensively, and simply said "How's he getting away with that?" – "That's his business".

**"The first thing that goes through my head is, Josh, you don't know these people. You might be seeing something now, but one thing I've learned in life is that nothing is what it seems. So, there could be loads of backstory on it."**

– Josh, (Age 22)

**"If it's a male, female, I don't know, a couple for example, there is social pressure to not intervene because it's their personal business in the same way, say if someone's shouting at their kids or effing and blinding at their young kids, it's disgusting, but you wouldn't necessarily intervene in that."**

– James (Age 41)

# Men will draw the line when behaviour falls below their own personal standard

**Through our research, men reported feeling internal discomfort when witnessing acts of misogyny.**

Specifically, because it falls below their personal standard of right or wrong.

Men frequently reported being motivated to act primarily by their intrinsic beliefs.

**Groups are sensitive to different ideas**

Our language analysis revealed that young people (13-25) articulate rights and wrongs more, reflected in 3.5x more mentions of “ok/not ok”, than 26-55-year-olds. White participants exclusively discredited misogyny as “old fashioned” or “outdated”, while mixed race participants mentioned rudeness (7.6x) and awkwardness (13x) more. Black participants mentioned “respect” 25.6x more than everyone else.

These figures suggest an explicit sensitivity to certain ideas being upheld, or violated.

**“When I got called out on it, I felt quite guilty myself. I felt like there’s a standard that I would like to show people I have, and I’ve instantly dropped that level now, where reality of expectation of here, and now it’s here.”**

– Dominic (Age 25)

**“It’s not about heroism, not about looking good to women, it’s about your own standards.”**

– Builder (Age 32)

**“As a human person, you have to clarify it for yourself. You have to reflect and you have to ask yourself why am I doing this? Why do I accept opinions like this? Then you have to stop it.”**

– Anonymous, (Age 41)

Imagine your mate called you out for saying something sexist or misogynistic. What part of that situation feels worst?

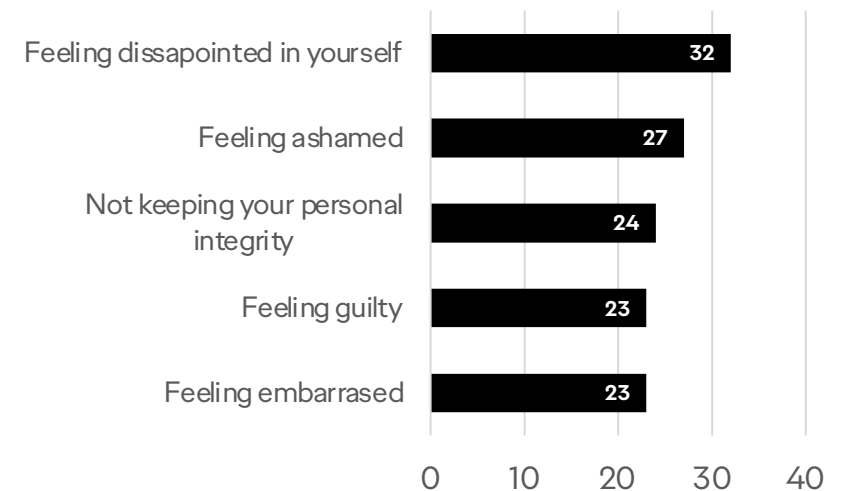


Fig 3: Video diary survey question 15. Qualitative response clustered into these using sociological coding (n = 48)

# **Bystanders feel most comfortable with respectful interventions.**

When asked to describe what the most effective interventions would be for inappropriate male behaviours, participants remarked that as both a bystander and perpetrator, the most effective approach would be a respectful one that doesn't embarrass the perpetrator.



# Accusatory intervention can lead to psychological reactance

**Psychological reactance is an unpleasant emotive reaction that occurs when people experience a threat to or loss of their autonomy.**

Compounded by the fact that no one thinks they are a problem (in this case, a misogynist), our participants described how they are much more likely to be defensive if called out in an open forum. Men would rather be made aware of their actions discretely than embarrassed in front of others.

To avoid this reactance, this study found that the most widely adopted approach to conflict de-escalation among men was to “diffuse and deflect”, either through humour, or simply by changing the subject. Our research has indicated that direct,

verbal *accusatory* call outs are not going to be adopted by men and may make things worse for potential victims.

**“Sometimes giving people space to climb down with their ego intact can be the safest thing to do. It might feel like the person is 'getting away' with the behaviour but sometimes that is safest in the moment.”**

– *NHS Safeguarding Team*

**“I went and sat opposite the man and I just struck up a conversation with him again purely so that he wouldn't talk to the girl anymore. And I think she was grateful for this.”**

– *Paddy (Age 47)*

**“They're very standoffish, get a bit defensive because it's almost like they didn't want to be accused of what they were doing. Even though it was blatantly obvious.”**

– *Sales Executive (Age 31)*

**“I would deflect it. I'd join in his conversation and bring that into my conversation. So, I wouldn't focus on the conversation that I'm having with that person because I don't want to be involved in it.”**

– *Barber (Age 21)*

**“We use it [humour] all the time to de-escalate situations in the barber shop.”**

– *Barber (Age 21)*

# Subtle verbal and non-verbal cues can be an effective intervention

**Within familiar settings where the rules of the group are loosely defined, participants stated that they preferred to be confronted directly by their friends.**

A change in tone, a word like “mate...”, or even body language such as a disappointing headshake is enough for a man to indicate that he’s “not kidding around” and disapproves of a friend's behaviour.

Participants also described often using silence to show disapproval. Particularly in settings where the perpetrator is looking for allyship or laughs.

This train of thought is corroborated by our video diary survey data. When asked which environments men would feel most

comfortable calling each other out, 28 of our 48 participants most preferred “a private mention in person in the moment”. 5 of the top 6 choices are in a private forum.

This preference for private interventions also accounts for why most participants felt more comfortable with offline interventions as opposed to interventions in public online spaces which have less psychological safety.

**“Sometimes it’s a little more subtle. Just a simple “come on” and tap. I think groups can be quite good at that.”**

– *Accountant (Age 46)*

**“If I was trying to avoid it, I just wouldn't respond, or I would just try and quickly change the subject.”**

– *Barber (Age 31)*

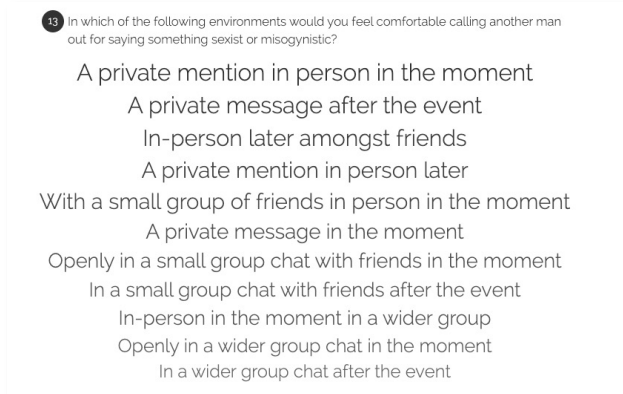


Fig 4: Video diary question 13, multiple choice responses ordered by rank.

# Men call each other out because of love and respect for one another

**Within familiar social groups, men perceive the actions of their friends to reflect on their own identity, or that of the groups'. "Only as strong as your weakest link".**

Our research suggests that men want to distance themselves from misogyny due to the negative social impact of being labelled a misogynist.

Based on this, we have found that one of the primary motivators men have for calling friends out on misogynistic acts is to protect those they care about from the stigma of appearing misogynistic, which will in turn reflect badly on them.

**"If one of my friends is being misogynistic, I couldn't just be in that space and do nothing. It reflects on me."**

*– Bar Staff (Age 25)*

**"It's not about shaming. It's about showing this isn't ok. Not attacking. We're all trying to do the same thing."**

*– Painter (Age 35)*

**"In any approach I think its important to be respectful because I think men are very stubborn sometimes."**

*– Investment Banker (Age 32)*

**"It is like, let them know I disagree, but not in any way where they feel challenged."**

*– Barber (Age 25)*

**"I think it's important that people are educated and respectful."**

*– Darius (Age 21)*

04

# Strategic Recommendations

# Recommendations to help men call out misogyny

## How might we:

1.

### Work with men, not against them

- A. Enable bystanders to approach perpetrators from a place of love and respect
- B. Leverage men's awareness that the misogyny of others reflects badly on them
- C. Appeal to intrinsic motivations like self-respect and personal standards
- D. Remind bystanders of the women in their lives

2.

### Make it easy and non-threatening for everyone

- A. Use humour in our intervention
- B. Create and popularise subtle cues, such as body language for men, to signal disapproval to other men
- C. Give bystanders tools to give their friends a 'way out' and save face
- D. Replace the 'awkward giggle' with a better alternative

3.

### Create cultural safety

- A. Reassure men that their group will back them very quickly if they speak up
- B. Reassure men that society at large backs them
- C. Empower men with actions that put women at ease when they intervene

4.

### Nudge Pragmatically

- A. Target men under the age of 40 who are more persuadable
- B. Use diverse communication sources across London's people network
- C. Create offline-first interventions that also work online
- D. Use language that won't alienate diverse worldviews



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