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Institute  
for  
Social  
Justice

York St. John University



# The Dancefloor Project

2023-24 Report

**BOLSHEE**

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ALL ABOUT  
RESPECT

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# MEET THE DANCEFLOOR TEAM

## York St John University

### Jenn Cassarly

Jennifer Cassarly conducts research focusing on sexual violence in vulnerable populations, specifically adolescents. She was recently a study coordinator for the Female Adolescent Development study and conducted interviews with 14- to 18-year-olds which involved discussing experiences of childhood maltreatment (e.g., sexual and physical abuse), consensual sexual activity, substance misuse, and self-harm. Most recently, she completed two studies that explored sexual consent with early adolescents through focus groups and evaluated a sexual consent educational programme in secondary schools.

### Melanie Douglass

Melanie Dawn Douglass is a senior lecturer in Psychology and programme lead of the Applied Psychology programmes at York St John University. Her research interests focus on interpersonal violence. She is part of the All About Respect Community Network and has conducted research in secure settings (forensic mental health), has experience conducting interviews with the general population about interpersonal violence, and has done project evaluations for the Home Office, Northumbria Police, and the Scottish Government related to the prevention of Serious and Organised Crime and the rehabilitation of offenders with a history of violence in intimate relationships. As part of her p/g training, she did a clinical extension (mental health) and has undertaken bystander and disclosure training.

### Anna Macklin

Anna Macklin is a senior lecturer in Psychology at York St John University. Her research interests focus on sexual violence. She is part of the All About Respect Community Network which aims to engage student communities in open and honest conversations focusing on healthy relationships and developing a culture of respect to strengthen sexual violence, harassment, and domestic abuse prevention. She has delivered bystander training to young adults and professionals working in related fields. Anna has also worked on projects focused on tackling sexual violence and harassment in the local community. She has worked with North Yorkshire Police and local charities supporting victims of sexual violence.

## Bolshee CIC

**Bolshee is a creative projects community interest company that includes everyone and champions women and girls through creativity and collaboration.**

**W**e work with people of all ages, backgrounds, experiences and collaborate to produce vibrant multidisciplinary creative projects with a social justice agenda.

We want people to feel heard. We want people to feel well. We want people to feel like they belong and we want to have a really good time!

### Paula Clark Creative Director

Paula Clark is Creative Director and co-founder of Bolshee CIC. She has worked for 25 years as an artist, creative director and executive producer. Developing and realising theatre, co-creation and talent development projects for young people and adults in community, education, theatre and arts settings. Most recently with Creative Scene, York St John University, York Theatre Royal, Pilot Theatre, ARC Stockton and Plaines Plough.

All of her creative projects have a strong focus on feminist practice and social justice. Paula has a particular interest in working with women and girls with lived experiences and protected characteristics, using creativity and skills development to improve wellbeing, platform voices, with a focus on empowerment and leadership.

Paula wants to level the playing field by making work that removes barriers, amplifies voices and brings communities and new audiences together and believes that this is best achieved through strategic and innovative partnerships and collaboration.

### Lizzy Whynes Associate Director

Lizzy Whynes is a theatre maker, dance artist, director and facilitator with expertise in delivering creative workshops with young people and adults. Over the past decade Lizzy has worked in community, education, theatre, and dance settings including Leeds Playhouse, Archipelago, CAST Doncaster, York Dance Space, Harrogate Theatre, York Theatre Royal, has worked on projects in collaboration with The National Theatre and is the Associate Artist: Youth & Communities at Interplay Theatre.

Lizzy makes work through collaboration and play that combines visual, textual and physical languages. Process is at the heart of her performances and play is at the heart of her process. Lizzy creates work to change, challenge and inspire, where everyone is an artist.

### Megan Bailey Creative Producer

Megan Bailey is a designer and creative producer, with experience of producing community led and co-created arts projects and events. Megan is a Producer for Creative Scene, has just completed a Masters in Culture, Creativity and Entrepreneurship at the University of Leeds and has previously worked with Leeds Arts University, Kaizen Arts Agency and York Theatre Royal.

Megan produces interdisciplinary arts projects and events, where everyone is invited to take part. Megan believes that culture, when everyone is part of the process from decision making to delivery, as artists and audience, makes the world a better place.



# THE DANCEFLOOR PROJECT



Have you ever felt unsafe on the bus, walking to work or on a night out?

The Dancefloor Project brings people together to explore ways we can make everyone feel safe and reduce sexual harm in public spaces.



**This is the pop-up dancefloor where you make the rules.**

**T**ake up some space, soak up the vibes, bust a move, pick up a pen and tell us your demands. What would make you feel safer on the dancefloor?

The Dancefloor Project is a collaboration between York St John University and Bolshee CIC, in association with York St John University Institute for Social Justice, and aims to explore what makes people feel safe and unsafe in the local community and how we can improve feelings of safety. As well as opening a dialogue about the prevalence of sexual harm in the local community and the impact this can have.

By utilising an arts-based research method, in the form of an interactive pop-up dance floor the project aims to understand individual feelings of safety and experiences of sexual harm in public spaces, and the individual and collective prevention strategies that individuals, especially women, implement to keep themselves, and others, safe. During The Dancefloor Project events participants are invited to request a song, have a dance, respond to the prompt questions by writing on the walls of the installation, submit anonymous stories via a locked box or QR code and have conversations with the facilitators and other participants about sexual harm and safety in public spaces.



# WHY DO WE NEED THE DANCEFLOOR?

**Public spaces play a pivotal role in individuals' social interactions, physical health, and emotional wellbeing (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, nd). Despite the benefits associated with public spaces many feel they cannot actively access them due to fear and concerns about safety.**

**M**any women have reported feeling unsafe on public transport (YouGov, 2022) and one in two women and one in seven men have reported feeling unsafe in public spaces after dark (End Violence against Women, 2021). In general, women feel less safe in public spaces than men (Office for National Statistics, 2021). While males' perceptions of safety are related to fears around physical threat women and girls disproportionately experience the threat of sexual harassment and violence in public spaces (Miller, 2021) and their safety concerns generally relate to fears about experiencing these behaviours (MacMillian et al., 2000).

Street harassment refers to unwanted sexual attention in public or semi-public settings (FairChild & Rudman, 2008). These behaviours can range from staring, catcalling, wolf whistling, verbal comments related to appearance and sexual proclivity, to stalking, invasion of personal space, and unwanted touch/groping (Stop Street Harassment, 2019). Street harassment is thought to affect anywhere between 65% to 90% of women

globally (Centre for Equality and Inclusion, 2009). Women report these behaviours as starting in late childhood/early adolescence (Stop Street Harassment, 2014) and the most reported types of street harassment are verbal comments, persistent gaze and wolf-whistling (Ahmad et al., 2020). As these behaviours happen in public spaces with others present who do not intervene the behaviour can often become an accepted part of society (Baptist & Coburn, 2019). Due to the pervasiveness of these behaviours some countries (e.g. India, Mexico, Egypt) have even adopted gender segregated public transport (Baptist & Coburn, 2019) which rather than tackle the root cause of the issue instead serves to elevate feelings of fear and reminds women of a mechanism of social control that if they enter certain public spaces their punishment is harassment (Kissling, 1991).

Perpetrators of street harassment are often reported to be strangers (MacMillian et al., 2000) which exacerbates feelings of being unsafe in public spaces. Due to safety concerns many women have reported changing

their behaviours and restricting their movements in public spaces (Stop Street Harassment, 2014). When women have experienced street harassment many have simply chosen not to return to the location again for fear of revictimization (Kearl, 2014) limiting the experiences and freedom that women should have. Not only are women changing their behaviours due to safety concerns there are also a range of negative outcomes associated with experiencing street harassment. Increased rates of anxiety, reduced sleep quality (DelGreco & Christensen, 2019), increased feelings of sexual vulnerability, being defenceless (MacMillian, 2000) and PTSD (Larsen & Fitzgerald, 2010) have been reported. With each experience of street harassment women have reported elevated vigilance in public spaces, they may develop a fear of unfamiliar males and an increased fear of being sexually assaulted which can lead to higher rates of depression (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008) and acceptance of beliefs that serve to justify and deny male sexual aggression towards women (e.g. rape myths, Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Street harassment can also further exacerbate the self-objectification of women. A process by which women increase their surveillance of their bodies and appearance which has been found to also lead to body shame, increased fear of rape, anxiety, depression and eating disorders (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It is evident that street harassment leads to a variety of adverse outcomes for individuals and society more broadly. A recent report has identified that change is required to ensure women and girls feel safe in public spaces throughout the day and all-year round (Barker & Holmes, 2022).

Previous research has investigated women's perceptions of safety in public spaces, but this has tended to focus on spiking (Brooks, 2014) or harassment in workplaces and schools (Rosenthal et al., 2016) rather than developing an understanding of the various individual and situational factors that can affect perceptions of safety. Additionally, while prevalence rates are important, they do not provide evidence of the lived experience (Thomas et al., 2022). Providing the opportunity for individuals to share

their experiences of street harassment and sexual harm can empower a shift from 'victim of trauma' to 'survivor' (Delker et al., 2019) and reduce feelings of being silenced and stigmatised (Nelson, 2016). Focusing on the lived experience provides rich data that can help inform preventative strategies and enhance safety for all. Fileborn (2021) reported that there was a strong desire to open conversations about street harassment and its impact and that there was a movement of awareness raising across many countries. Whilst some suggest that women should be encouraged to develop skills and strategies to improve their sense of feeling safe this can lead to victim-blaming which is already endemic in those that have experienced street harassment. A perception that the experience was their fault, and they should be blamed (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Instead, women should be encouraged to disclose their experiences and take part in social action projects to tackle the underlying mechanisms that lead to street harassment (Szymanski et al., 2021) and making it a visible social issue.

The dancefloor project aims to begin the conversation in local communities about street harassment and safety. It can be difficult to engage participants in conversations about sensitive topics such as street harassment with traditional techniques, but utilising more arts based creative techniques can enable participants to engage and disclose (Dickson, 2021). Graffiti walls have been used in a small number of previous studies to encourage self-expression (Hicks et al., 2019) and to encourage conversations about safety wall graffiti was utilised on the dancefloor. The dancefloor project aimed to elevate the voices of individuals identifying as female to shine a light on their safety concerns about public spaces, to explore their experiences of street harassment and violence, to provide a safe and uplifting environment in which to make clear statements about how they want to be treated in public spaces and what makes them feel safe. The focus was on the female voice but all in the community were actively encouraged to engage and participate in the dancefloor events with the overarching aim of making public spaces safer for all.



# RESEARCH AIMS

The dancefloor project utilised an interactive art installation to engage the local community in conversations around safety and collected data on the following questions:

- 1 How do participants want to be treated in public spaces?
- 2 What makes participants feel safe?
- 3 What strategies do participants use to get home following a night out?
- 4 Where do participants feel safe/unsafe in the local community?

We also wanted to understand the lived experiences of the local community in relation to sexual harassment and violence and barriers to reporting these behaviours.

# THE DANCEFLOOR EVENTS

## What happened at the events?

Participants were invited to enjoy the party atmosphere and to experience and reimagine safer, more equitable public spaces. The events were facilitated by the Bolshee team, who combined have over 30 years' experience in arts facilitation, holding space and platforming diverse participants' voices in various settings.

### Participants were invited to:

- \* Request a song.
- \* Take up space.
- \* Make your demands.
- \* Respond to prompt questions by writing on the walls of the installation.
- \* Submit anonymous disclosures via a locked box or QR code.
- \* Identify on a local map areas of safety/risk.
- \* Chat to facilitators and other participants.

**York St John University,  
Students Union**  
16 February 2023

We popped up in York St John University, Student Union, to understand student's perceptions of safety in public spaces.

**Participant numbers: 12**

### **The Crescent**

5 March 2023

At The Crescent, a local music venue and nightlife space, the event engaged the general population including a diverse mix of ages.

**Participant numbers: 36**

### **Street Life Hub**

1 April 2023

We brought the dance floor to the Street Life Hub on Coney Street, accompanied by an exhibition exploring women in the music industry. This event was in the day and engaged a wide range of participants.

**Participant numbers: 32**

### **University of York, Scenic Stage Theatre**

31 May 2023

At the University of York, we joined the students from the School of Arts and Creative Technologies for their third year festival of work.

**Participant numbers: 28**

**Total  
participants: 108**



# RESULTS

## Analysis of the wall data

**W**e analysed data using thematic analysis. Following exploring surface structure, we moved on to inductive coding, before comparing the generated codes against the original data. Categorising data involved triangulation with researchers, before we summarized themes, as outlined below.

### Themes: How do you want to be treated in public spaces?

The overarching theme identified in the community members' responses to how they wanted to be treated in public is being treated with respect (90%). Most responses (38%) were general statements about being respected with some as simple as 'with respect'. Other responses were more specific such as being treated with respect by not getting in someone's personal space, not being objectified, and being left alone in public.

**WITH RESPECT**

Treat me with respect

Leave me alone

Be kind

Respect my personal physical space

Don't objectify me

### Themes: What makes you feel safe?

When asked what makes you feel safe when out at night, 40% of the community members who responded stated that they felt safe when in a safe venue, described as being familiar and LGBTQ-friendly as well as having supportive staff who are trained in safety initiatives such as 'Ask for Angela' and having in-house safety measures such as being able to ask for free water.

Being with friends, a partner, or around trustworthy people was stated by 36% of respondents to be something that makes them feel safe when going out. Importantly, many (42%) of those who said that being with friends made them feel safe, specified certain types of friend characteristics such as those who are 'sober', 'will look out for me', and 'won't get annoyed if I want to leave'.

Additionally, having a way out of an uncomfortable situation such as having a charged phone to call someone, a planned way of getting home, and a quiet space to escape to in a busy setting were all highlighted as making people feel safe while out at night.

**BEING IN A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE VENUE**

Venue is LGBTQ+ friendly

Venue has in-house safety measures

Venue is familiar

Venue has supportive staff

Being with friends / partner

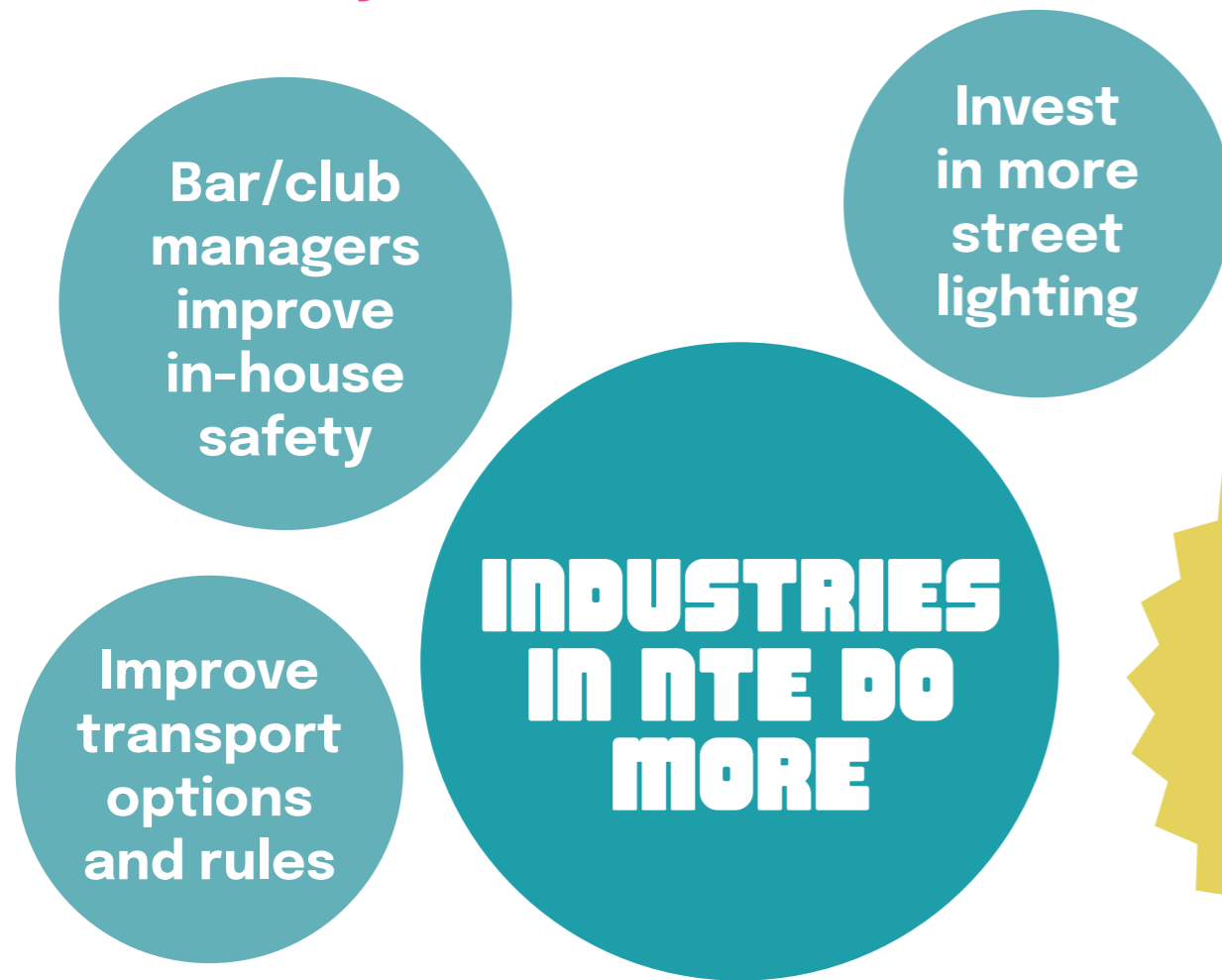
The absence of men

Good friends

**BEING AROUND PEOPLE**



## Themes: Tell us your demands



When members of the community were asked to state their demands for what needs to be done to improve safety, most demands (82%) were directed toward industries involved in the night-time economy (NTE, e.g. bar and club managers, transport). The most common theme (31%) was a demand for better street safety, mainly around improved street lighting, but also wider advertising for help lines. Another common theme (26%) was the view that transportation at night could be made safer, for example through the availability of later buses and more reliable taxi services. A similar number of people called for bars and clubs to introduce more in-house safety measures such as offering free anti-spiking drink toppers, phone charging stations, and increasing security. A minority (5) highlighted that members of the community needed to change their behaviour to improve safety, such as respecting personal space and challenging friends' inappropriate behaviour.



## Themes: How do you get home from a night out?



The most common way of getting home at night was reported to be walking (48%), with 37% of those who walk home stating that they do so with friends. Taking a taxi or an Uber (23%) was the second most common way of getting home after a night out. Some respondents reported staying overnight at a friend's before returning home the next day (10%) to avoid walking home alone at night.

A key theme around getting home at night focused on the emotional nature of this experience. Several responses focused on engaging in cautious behaviours such as not traveling home alone or texting a friend when arriving home (23%). Relatedly, the same number of people reported feeling unsafe when traveling home or 'lucky' that they made it home safe.



# Analysis of the York City Centre map



Participants were asked to identify on the map areas of York they felt safe and unsafe (green dots for safe areas, red dots for unsafe areas). The data from the map corresponds well with what participants reported through the wall data. Namely, that key areas of transition, i.e., where one would have to walk if travelling between night-time economy venues and residential areas, were perceived of as less safe. This does not necessarily correspond with violence against women and girls taking place largely at home, but this may be due to the study focusing on

the night-time economy, which may have primed people to think about perceptions of unsafety in public spaces.

A second way that the map data correspond to the wall data is the extent to which situational factors, such as street lighting, can almost be 'seen' in the data. The areas around the river and bridges are notorious for being poorly lit and relatively quiet, compared to the streets directly around night-time economy venues.

# Dancefloor Team Reflections

## York St John University (Melanie Douglass and Anna Macklin)

The project is very different from anything that the AAR team has done previously. This has resulted in being stretched professionally to think about our research questions in novel ways. At the outset, we very much wanted to hear from participants about how venues/spaces could be adapted to foster feelings of safety. At times, the methodology and general approach felt quite radical, and we weren't sure what sort of responses we'd end up with but actually, the most striking part of the results was how simple the demands were. They boiled down to being treated respectfully - essentially a basic human right, at the centre of all laws and conventions.

The second thing was how much is within the control of venues/the local authority. Really simple things they can do to foster safety - like providing access to cold, running water. If you really unpack that, it tells us a lot. A lot about how experiences on a typical night out are all too often so far from even the most basic expectations we have as citizens. These aren't radical requests. They aren't things we should have to ask for in the first place. Some requests require capital investments, but most could be implemented easily and cheaply. Let's ensure staff are properly trained, they know the behaviours to look out for, they feel confident and empowered to challenge problematic behaviour and offer support to those affected. Provide free water, anti-spiking lids, and promote relevant charities and organisations in-house. Venues that foster an environment of respect and safety will ultimately increase their customer base and contribute to a broader community effort around safety.

Working with community partners has really highlighted for us things that we take for granted as academics. For example, processes around ethics. This has made us think more deeply about the utility of those processes and where creative methods could be incorporated to meet the requirements of our governing bodies/employers while best serving participants and interdisciplinary research partners.

## Bolshee CIC

**Megan Bailey:** The Dancefloor Project created an open and emergent space. It was experiential, anti-extrativist and non-limiting; the conversations the participants wanted to have emerged through their engagement. The multiple ways to interact allowed for the self-expression of complex ideas and experiences, unearthing the participants' experiential and embodied knowledge. This broadened the scope of discussion, rather than seeking to answer pre-determined questions. People wanted to talk about safety and sexual harm, and they had a lot to say.

By taking up space where sexual harm pervades, we created a 'brave space', allowing people to demand and experience a more equitable environment in the public spaces they already occupy. This act of making the familiar, unfamiliar, shifted participants' perspectives and promoted empathy, while interactivity allowed participants to reflect and learn from each other in real time to develop shared understandings and a commitment to behavioural change. Instead of focusing on the prevalence of sexual harm, The Dancefloor Project platforms and celebrates the individual experiences and ways in which women already resist and challenge gender-based violence in public spaces. I hope that it was as empowering for the participants, as it was for us to deliver it.







# WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE DANCEFLOOR PROJECT?

**Paula Clark:** What I found so powerful about the Dancefloor is the way it started conversations, in the space and after in the bar. Conversations with mothers about how they talk to their sons. Discussions with men who felt they should not be entering the space because of a fear of intruding on a subject that they felt wasn't about them; ironically and then the surprise and shock at learning the lengths we all go about to protect ourselves from harm. The conversations spilled into other ways people felt unsafe, racism, homophobia, and other hate crimes. These conversations felt like the essence of what we were trying to achieve but only still the very beginning of actual change. There is so much more work to do. The Dancefloor will and needs to live on and move on to have a real social impact. It needs to go big.

And we need to be allowed to have these open frank conversations without the restrictions we place on ourselves as institutions around ethics otherwise we are shutting down serious and urgent conversations because of fear. We need to address how to have open dialogue without opening trauma in people or accept that this is impossible and that the only alternative is to shut down the voices of the millions of women who have been victims of sexual harm and want to call it out and effect change. Making it a perpetrators' world. This is an area for further research.

**Lizzy Whynes:** I loved that The Dancefloor Project allowed its participants to take up some space in our installation. The energy was always vibrant with everyone being able to request their favourite floor fillers and bust a move to their favourite bangers in a safe space where everyone is equal without any feelings of threat.

In between the good vibes and the excellent dance moves we were able to have open and honest conversations about the horrid realities that many of us must face when going out into the world. Everyone was included which was crucial to The Dancefloor Projects success as everyone needs to be part of the conversation to be able to impact change.

Dancing is an expression of freedom. It is an expression of joy from the body, and everybody deserve to feel safe on the dancefloor, on the streets, in the world and within themselves.

**W**ith funding from the Home Office and as part of the North Yorkshire Police and Fire Crime Commissioner Safer Streets project with All About Respect (AAR) the dancefloor installation will be showcased at local higher education institutions across the county empowering more young people to be part of the conversation around safety. In addition, the AAR team will be running education awareness events to promote healthy relationships and messages of safety with young people, bystander training will be offered to educational institutions and surveys and focus groups will be conducted with young people to evaluate the effectiveness of the AAR strategies utilised.

To find out more go to

<https://allaboutrespectysj.wordpress.com>

## To Book The Dancefloor Project

Please get in touch with  
[bolsheeprojects@gmail.com](mailto:bolsheeprojects@gmail.com)

[Bolshee.com](http://Bolshee.com)

 [@bolsheecreativeprojects](https://www.instagram.com/bolsheecreativeprojects)

 [@bolshee](https://www.facebook.com/bolshee)

 [@BolsheeCIC](https://www.linkedin.com/company/BolsheeCIC)



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**“WE SHOULD ALL FEEL SAFE, WHETHER WE ARE AT WORK, WALKING ALONE AT NIGHT, ON THE TRAIN OR ON THE DANCE FLOOR. FOR MANY PEOPLE, AND ESPECIALLY WOMEN, THIS IS UNFORTUNATELY NOT THE CASE.”**



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