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<https://unherd.com/newsroom/women-and-girls-were-the-victims-of-the-southport-attack/> (Accessed 5 August 2024)

Women and girls were the victims of the Southport attack

By [Joan Smith](#)[1]



Mourners gather today at the site of the stabbings which killed three young girls. Credit: Getty

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Sometimes a news story breaks and what’s not being said seems painfully obvious. It happened yesterday, when [reports](#)[2] of a multiple stabbing in Southport in North West England kept referring to the victims as “adults and children”. What kind of “people” go to a Taylor Swift-themed dance class? It couldn’t have been more evident that the dead and injured were girls and their female teachers, yet such a vital point was obscured by the framing.

We now know that three girls — [aged six, seven and nine](#)[3] — died in or after the attack. Eight other girls were stabbed and five are said to be in a “critical” condition, along with two women assumed to

be their teachers. A 17-year-old boy has been arrested but we know very little about him, despite [wild speculation](#)[4] on social media. What is increasingly clear, though, is that this seems like a targeted attack on women and girls, and certainly not the first of its kind.

Seven years ago, another man launched a [targeted attack](#)[5] on a venue packed with girls and their mothers. Ariana Grande has a huge following among teenage and younger girls, and her concert at the Manchester Arena in 2017 was the only one for weeks where the audience fitted that profile. Of the 22 fatalities, 17 were women or girls, while the youngest, 8-year-old Saffie Roussos, was in the same age group as yesterday's victims.

There is a pattern here of young men attacking venues where all or most of the “people” killed will be female, yet the emergency services and the media appear to be reluctant to dwell on the sex of the victims. When something is so obvious — and speaks so pertinently to motive — why not say so from the outset? These are profoundly misogynist attacks and they fit into a narrative, [identified](#)[6] by police chiefs only last week, in which violence against women and girls has reached epidemic proportions.

That [report](#)[7] by the National Police Chiefs' Council made headlines, yet it's as if this week's horrific event in Southport is entirely unrelated. Did crime correspondents forget all the interviews they carried out last week? More likely, they believe that a mass-casualty event belongs in a different category, even though women and girls are so often the primary targets. One of the worst mass shootings in the US, the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012, is usually thought of only as a school shooting. But 12 of the 20 primary school children who died were girls, while *all* of the adult victims were female.

The extent of misogyny, and its role as a motive in terrible crimes, appears to be too much for many commentators to stomach. It creates a striking dissonance as harrowing accounts emerge, yet the most significant element is missing. Earlier this month, when the wife and daughters of the BBC racing commentator John Hunt were [found killed](#)[8], many of the reports focused on the alleged perpetrator, obscuring the fact that this was yet another crime targeted exclusively on women.

It's easier — and perhaps less alarming — to see such crimes as one-offs. But they aren't. We have a problem with men who hate women, whether they kill a former partner, a complete stranger or launch a mass-casualty attack. The warning signs are always there, but a society desperate to blame something else refuses to act on them. We're yet to learn the Southport attacker's motivations. But surely such horrors will keep happening until we acknowledge the extreme danger some men pose to women and girls.

Joan Smith is a novelist and columnist. She was previously Chair of the Mayor of London's Violence Against Women and Girls Board. Her book [Unfortunately, She Was A Nymphomaniac: A New History of Rome's Imperial Women](#)[9] will be published in November 2024.

(twitterhandle)[polblonde](#)[10]

Links From Text:

[1] <https://unherd.com/author/joan-smith/>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/29/man-held-after-people-injured-in-reported-southport-stabbing>

[3] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/cevwgqz0x41t>

[4] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/07/30/merseyside-police-southport-suspect-name-online-wrong/>

[5] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-67143958>

[6] <https://unherd.com/newsroom/is-andrew-tate-to-blame-for-violence-against-women-or-a-distraction/>

[7] <https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/call-to-action-as-violence-against-women-and-girls-epidemic-deepens-1>

[8] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c72vlq5l6n4o>

[9] https://www.amazon.co.uk/Unfortunately-She-was-Nymphomaniac-Imperial/dp/0008638802?source=ps-sl-shoppingads-lpcontext&ref_=fplfs&psc=1&smid=A3P5ROKL5A1OLE

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