

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls response to the Ofcom consultation on Protecting Children from Harms Online

The Executive Office has been mandated to lead the development of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (EVAWG). This process has included a programme of research and engagement, the publication of Call for Views Summary Report in August 2022 and public consultation on draft Strategic Framework, draft Foundational Action Plan and related EQIA which closed on 3 October 2023.

Stakeholders have reflected the information below during EVAWG engagement meetings, in their written responses to the EVAWG Call for Views and in their responses to the public consultation:

- There has been rise in online abuse which includes online threats, coercion, cyber stalking, revenge porn and cyber flashing, leading to threats, uninvited messages, receipt of unsolicited images and harassment.
- Perpetrators using increasingly sophisticated technology for example software to produce deep fake images – this has culminated in instances of sextortion.
- The increase in the availability of online pornography has altered how boys perceive sex and how they view healthy relationships and consent.
- That the nature of comments online in both posts and comments are discriminatory, misogynistic, and threatening.
- Harmful sexual behaviour in schools can be manifested in non-consensual image sharing.
- Online abuse can happen anywhere that allows online communication, including social networks, text messages and messaging apps, email and private messaging, online chats, comments on livestreaming sites and voice or video chat in games. Perpetrators may also share abusive images, live streams and recordings with others online.
- There has been an increase in self-generated imagery as a form of abuse.
- There is a need for regulation to better reflect the cross-platform nature of many online risks - grooming can move from popular social networking sites to livestreamed abuse.
- Strengthening of safeguarding controls for children and young people to protect them from viewing online explicit material and engaging in harmful sexual behaviour using social media platforms.
- There needs to be parity in the level of support offered to children abused online as to those abused offline.
- The fast and ever-changing online space needs to be kept pace with as technology evolves.
- The raising of awareness among parents and guardians on the risks involved in the online space and equipping them with information to discuss those risks.
- Broader education around the risks of tech abuse must be carefully balanced, so that perpetrators of violence are not inadvertently upskilled into realising there are new ways they can abuse their victim.
- Young people are typically early adopters of new tech, so awareness of the implications and potential misuse of it within the context of gender-based violence is crucial – and should be delivered in both schools and community settings.
- Victims of online abuse should not be encouraged to delete apps or remove themselves from social media, it should be the perpetrators behaviour that is challenged.

- A focus on common devices such as phones and tablets could result in other devices such as smart watches being overlooked in Risk Assessments.
- The outsourcing of moderation of content by organisations is a potential risk to the rigorousness of the moderation process.

Examples of data and research findings

- *Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2023* found that 35% of children and young people aged 3-17 in NI reported that they had seen something worrying or nasty online, which was equal to the percentage in Wales (35%) but higher than in Scotland (32%) and England (29%).
- The PSNI stats branch have identified that of the 198 recorded sexual communication with a child offence in 2022/23, 68% were known to be female of whom 38% were aged under 12 and 62% were aged 12 to 15.
- *SBNI – Growing Up Online in NI* research report highlighted of those aged 8-13 – 19.84% had something unpleasant or nasty happen to them online in the last couple of months (for girls this was 22.61% for girls compared with 16.55% for boys). 60.68% said this happened once or twice, 22.25% three to five times and 17.07% more than five times.
- The SBNI research report found that of those aged 14-18 – 18.49% had something unpleasant or nasty happen to them online in the last couple of months (for females this was 20.47% and for males 14.71%). 59.76% said this happened once or twice, 18.11% three to five times and 22.13% more than five times.
- In the same research report children across both age ranges identified the following dangers of the internet - danger posed by predators, scammers, hackers, viruses, catfishing, bullying, groomers, trolls, stalkers, explicit content, impersonation and 'dangerous trends'.
- They also outlined the importance of raising awareness of the dangers of the internet, knowing the difference between what fake and real, clearer warnings, faster responses by social media companies to block or remove inappropriate content, and there was almost universal agreement that more needed to be done in terms of age verification to access apps as they were easy to circumvent and required more stringent proof of ID.

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