

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, HC 840

Wednesday 2 July 2025

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Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Dan Aldridge; Chris Bloore; Sorcha Eastwood; Claire Hanna; Leigh Ingham; Katrina Murray; Dr Al Pinkerton; Gavin Robinson.

Questions 42 - 71

Witnesses

I: Professor Olga Jurasz, Director, Centre for Protecting Women Online; Bernie McNally OBE, Independent Chair, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland; Jessica Smith, Online Safety Principal, Ofcom.

Science, Innovation and Technology Committee member also present: Emily Darlington.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Olga Jurasz, Bernie McNally and Jessica Smith.

Q42 **Chair:** Welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee session on ending violence against women and girls. We are grateful to our witnesses for coming today to talk about VAWG in Northern Ireland. This is our second session on the issue.

We understand that some people may find today's evidence session distressing and difficult to listen to, but there are several organisations that can offer support, including Rights of Women, Victim Support Northern Ireland and the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline.

We are also joined by Emily Darlington, who is our guest on the Committee today.

I invite our witnesses to say who they are and what their role is.

Professor Jurasz: Good morning. My name is Olga Jurasz. I am professor of law at the Open University, and director of the Centre for



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Protecting Women Online. We are a cross-disciplinary unit that works towards advancing women's safety, and we do that through cross-disciplinary research and cross-sectoral collaborations.

Bernie McNally: Good morning, everyone. My name is Bernie McNally and I am from Belfast. I am chair of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, which is an inter-agency partnership of the various statutory agencies involved in safeguarding children, such as health, social services and the police, et cetera; we also have some voluntary sector involvement. One of our key strategic priorities over the last four years, and continuing in the next four years, is domestic violence and its impact on children.

Jessica Smith: I am Jessica Smith. I work at Ofcom, leading our work on protecting women and girls online.

Q43 **Chair:** Jessica, in your experience, why do people choose to commit violence against women and girls online?

Jessica Smith: That is a great question, and a very big one. There are particular aspects of the online environment that make it quite easy at the moment for violence to be perpetrated online. We live so much of our lives online. What we have found when we have spoken to survivors of domestic abuse is that so much of that is now enabled by people on messaging services and needing to have so much of their homes connected to online services. It becomes just another vector through which violence can be perpetrated against women and girls, and not really one that the victim or survivor can opt out of. They need to continue to be able to be online for their lives, their businesses and their connections with their families and friends, so they are sometimes trapped in those sorts of situation. What we want to do is to make tech firms take this issue much more seriously and do what they can to reduce the risks to the women and girls who need to use their services as part of their daily lives.

Q44 **Chair:** In your work, Olga, what do you think?

Professor Jurasz: I agree with what has been said, but I will go a little more deeply to say first that we cannot ignore the root causes of violence against women and girls, which we know are structural inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, as well as misogyny, sexism and gender stereotypes, which have been present in societies for millennia. It is not a new problem, but we are seeing it amplified through technology and online spaces.

Misogyny in particular has been popularised. We witness it every day. It has also been monetised. Quite simply, it is for profit. We see some changes that need to be taken into consideration here, given that we are looking at online and tech-facilitated violence against women and girls.

I would add that, back in 2023, I ran what I believe is the largest study in the UK, across the four nations, on online violence against women and



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girls. Respondents in that survey, of which there were just over 1,500 in Northern Ireland, approximately 50:50 men and women, identified three main reasons why they think that online violence against women is taking place: misogyny, online anonymity and, quite simply, the ease of getting away with it.

Bernie McNally: I agree with Olga in the sense that violence against children, and against women and girls, has been around for millennia. The difference here is that child abuse and domestic violence have always been in a secret environment. The internet makes it that much more secret. In the past, parents may have been very concerned about where their children were and who they were meeting, and they were able to keep an eye on them; it is much more difficult now for parents to do that because a lot of this abuse is happening behind bedroom doors. Quite often, parents do not feel equipped to examine the devices or to understand what is going on. We have some evidence that children have separate accounts, so parents are looking at one account but the children have another. Children are quite creative, as you know, and will find ways to buck the system, basically, and make sure that their parents do not see what they are watching. Parents can also be tricked into thinking that the sites the kids are on are good ones, but they are not.

The whole secret environment is a really important issue, because all of this is behind closed doors, particularly domestic violence. The online world has been used to stalk women, to understand where they are, to send them messages, and to coercively control them. These are things that have been happening anyway. The internet has just lifted it up a level, if you like, so that perpetrators of these offences against women and children, as Olga said, feel that they have immunity and that no one is going to catch them; they feel a lot more secure.

The whole purpose of coercive control around children in particular is to make them fearful and involve them in their own abuse and in the grooming process, so that the children do not tell. Once they have shared something online, for example, probably voluntarily, they believe that they are the ones who are in trouble. It is a very complex web of abuse and of keeping silent.

Q45 **Chair:** Bernie, what does online violence against women and girls look like in Northern Ireland? Is it any different? Do you have any concerns?

Bernie McNally: I doubt that it is that different from anywhere else in the UK or in Ireland, or across the world, even. Some of the statistics globally would correlate with those that we have. We know that it is increasing. From the police data that we have, we know that under-18s made up 25% of online crime, with 949 offences recorded, in just one year. Some of those offences involve stalking, harassment and sexual offences, and mostly involve girls.

We know that that is probably the tip of the iceberg, because what we know about child abuse is that children do not tell. We had a very serious



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case recently that has now gone through the courts, so I am able to discuss it, involving Alexander McCartney, who was an online predator. You have probably heard of this guy. He was a prolific child abuser. He had 3,500 known victims, and it is unlikely that that is even close to what his victims were. We are probably talking about 10 or maybe 20 times that number of victims. Out of the 3,500 victims, only four children told. This guy was convicted of manslaughter of a young child in the USA who committed suicide as a result of his online abuse.

One of the things that he did very effectively was, even when children made first contact, or he was able to make first contact with children on an open site, he almost instantly moved them to Snapchat or to another encrypted site. He was able to do that almost within seconds of getting in touch with these kids, and was then able to manipulate, groom and abuse these children and involve them. People talk about online abuse being non-contact, but it absolutely is, because what these guys do—and what Alexander McCartney did very effectively—is involve the children on the other side of the line in child abuse. They were involving their younger siblings, or animals, in really vile abuse of other people. The children themselves were being groomed, and some of them were only five years old.

That gave us a good, strong idea of what happens. I was talking to the public prosecutor, who was saying that they had to take a small sample of the offences that this guy had been involved in, because the amount of abuse that he had perpetrated against children was enormous. He was based in Newry, in County Down, and he was abusing children in New Zealand, Australia, America and all over the world. If you take just that one case and extrapolate it to the normal population, you can see the extent of the problem.

I would really emphasise that child abuse is the child abuse. The online is the platform for perpetrating it. Domestic violence is happening, but the online has made it easier for it to happen and more difficult for law enforcement to catch it and deal with it. You find that the children are afraid to tell, and it really bothered me when I heard that only four children had reported this. We have spent years talking about encouraging children to talk about the good touch/bad touch stuff, and to tell their mummy, a trusted adult, a teacher, or the pass-through care officer in school—anybody—and yet these children felt that they could not tell anyone.

It was only when one child did tell her mum in America that all the dots started to get crossed by law enforcement across the world, and it focused back down into a small bedroom in a house outside Newry, in County Down. That just shows you the reach of these guys.

Q46 Chair: Yes, totally. Thank you, Bernie. Olga, you mentioned your data from 2023, but is there anything else specific to Northern Ireland that you would like to tell us about?



Professor Jurasz: Yes, absolutely. Northern Ireland is not really an outlier in terms of the volume of online violence. My survey has shown that around 12% of women in Northern Ireland said that they have experienced online violence. If you look at it positively, the majority of women say that they have not experienced online violence, but there is also a good proportion of women who say that they are unsure. They have experienced something online, but they are not quite sure whether they would say it is violence or abuse, which can also point towards the issue of normalisation of these kinds of behaviours and the violence that women experience. It just becomes a part of everyday life, unfortunately.

I want to really draw your focus to the impact of online violence, which we really see being slightly different in Northern Ireland than in other nations of the United Kingdom. 96% of women who have experienced online violence in Northern Ireland say that it has had an impact on their lives. The majority of women who experience online violence say that it had predominantly silencing effects, which, essentially, means they decided that, as a result of their experience, to withdraw from voicing their opinions or participating in online spaces, which, of course, has quite a strong impact on women's participatory rights. It is quite difficult to imagine the world today, as a woman and as a professional, without having access to digital devices, online spaces and so on.

Those silencing effects are particularly deeply felt for women in Northern Ireland. 53% of women who experienced online violence said that it had silencing effects. This compares with 35% of women in Wales, 39% in Scotland and 42% in England. How important that finding is cannot be underestimated in the context of the quite recent history that Northern Ireland has of the Troubles and still being in the process of transitioning from conflict, where we know that it is absolutely paramount for women to be represented in those political processes and in public and political life.

As many women politicians and women running for office in Northern Ireland have said, they have also experienced online violence. Indeed, we see that withdrawal of women from politics, not only in the UK but also worldwide, because of the experience that they have in online spaces, which has absolutely damaging effects on our democracies and our political processes worldwide.

Q47 **Chair:** Thank you. Jessica, how do you see it from your perspective at Ofcom?

Jessica Smith: I absolutely agree, particularly with what Olga just said about the silencing effects of online abuse on women in public life in particular, but also on women who are trying to have an online presence because they want to run a business or just want to connect with family and friends, which is something that we all do. That is a big area of focus for our guidance on protecting women and girls online, which we have recently consulted on.



Part of the reason for trying to draw attention to this issue around the silencing effect is that, if you think about it from a platform perspective at the moment, they might look at a woman who may be at the centre of a social media pile-on, for example, and see a lot of different pieces of content if a lot of people are harassing a woman in a co-ordinated way online. If they are moderating that content piece by piece, it might not reach a threshold at which they would say, "This is not acceptable," but, taken together, if you are the person at the centre of that social media pile-on, that is horrific. It does not matter that one individual—probably a man—might just be expressing his big feelings.

There is a need to centre what that woman's experience of that social media environment is, and to take action accordingly. We have proposed some sensible things that we think they can do, which are about, "What does unusual activity look like? How do you respond when you are seeing lots of different posts on a woman's account?" For example, it might be lots of different negative comments on a piece of content that she has posted.

It is then also about the action that you can enable women to take to protect themselves online. We are very conscious that we do not want to put all of the safety work on women to have to protect themselves when they go out and about online, but that is part of the answer.

The other part is being alert and alive to when you might need to say, "Even though some of these individual pieces of content do not meet a threshold of illegality or harassment, we still need to shut this down." From the perspective of the victim, online is going to be a very scary place to be right now.

We are thinking about what practical steps platforms can take to make that easier, but we are conscious that dealing with this in a piecemeal way is only going to go so far. We need to have a broader conversation about what is acceptable conduct online and how we improve media literacy and understanding of what online citizenship looks like, effectively.

Chair: I am going to bring in Sorchia and then Emily.

Sorchia Eastwood: Emily, I am going to let you go first. You can probably tell part of our story better than I can, because I feel like I am too involved. Do you want to go for the both of us?

Q48 Emily Darlington: Sorchia and I have both experienced pile-ons from exactly the same source, shall we say, and it is not a pleasant experience. One of the things that I am quite keen on understanding in terms of Ofcom's role and what Ofcom can do is that these pile-ons are not just one man with a particular fixation. It is their ability to then activate a series of other people to join in that pile-on, including their access to bots, which become part of the pile-on and just amplify it. Given the algorithmic response, it then activates it to many other people,



because it is a high-performing post. What are the powers that Ofcom currently has in terms of putting pressure on social media companies to take action during these co-ordinated pile-ons and on the use of bots?

Jessica Smith: Under the Online Safety Act, what social media companies have to do is address illegal content, and content that is harmful to children. We also have this broader role in relation to women's and girls' online safety, where we have set up some best practice that we think they should follow in order to demonstrate that they are taking women's and girls' online safety seriously. I just draw your attention to that because we are covering different types of content. There is content that is illegal, there is content that is harmful to children, and then there is a broader set of content that is about acceptable conduct online and does not meet the threshold of illegality.

Algorithms are key in how content gets recommended to people, how a social media theme emerges, and what people are engaged with. What we know is that more extreme content can be more engaging. We have seen that, up to the point where terms of service kick in and content is moderated, the more extreme the content is, the more eyeballs it gets and the more time people spend looking at it, so algorithms are absolutely key in how this is addressed.

In terms of the roles for services and what they need to do to address algorithms, we have, just this week, announced a new consultation on ensuring that services take content that is likely to be illegal out of recommender algorithms, so that, if there is any indication that it could be illegal content, it is not recommended to users. Those rules are already there in terms of children. Content that is likely to be harmful to children cannot be part of children's recommender systems. They are not in force yet, but will be at the end of this month. There is a baseline set of rules there around what content can be recommended.

In the context of a social media pile-on, the way that that should operate is that a service should absolutely take out any content that is illegal, harmful to children, or in violation of its terms of service, from a recommender system.

This is where our guidance comes in and where what we are asking them to do is to think about the effect of this content from the perspective of the person at the centre of it, which is to look at related content as well, i.e. people who are joining in the pile-on but not necessarily posting things that are illegal. We would ask them to shut down comments. We would ask them to ensure that relevant content was not being amplified by the social media algorithm, in the hope that that took some of the heat out of that particular situation. There are other responses as well if there is a crisis that might be creating a storm or a social media pile-on somewhere else.

Q49 Emily Darlington: You have effectively described the gap here, which is that, yes, the algorithm is a contributing force, but it is the behaviour of



posters and the ability to then bring in bots, which is currently not considered illegal online. Therefore, Ofcom has no direct powers, even though we know that it is harmful. In an offline world, if somebody was to behave that way and go outside somebody's house and organise a protest of 20,000 people, even if they were all saying legal things, that intimidation and that activity would be policed, with the police saying, "No, you must step away and allow this woman to conduct her life."

You have also not touched on the point about what the regulation is around bots and people who are buying that additional capacity to intimidate and share content, whatever activity they are currently doing, if that activity is meant to harass or pinpoint. They are very good at writing messages that are not violent in and of themselves, but clearly describe a situation where, "This woman needs to be taken down. This woman needs to be doxed," which, in and of itself, is not illegal.

Jessica Smith: Under the Online Safety Act, services have to have effective systems and processes in place for dealing with illegal content, so where the content is coming from is not part of our jurisdiction.

Q50 **Sorcha Eastwood:** Emily, you are absolutely right. There has clearly been a loophole that has been identified there. From my perspective, a further local example of this is Bernie's example of the Alexander McCartney case. Emily and I should not have to go through this, but we can take recourse to help ourselves against these threats. We are very privileged in that respect. What concerns me is the young people who are not going to have recourse to these forms of help, and who are going to be sitting in their bedrooms, as Bernie has said, whether it is in Newry, Lisburn, Portadown or wherever, and we are not going to be able to help them to articulate their voice. That really concerns me.

When I met with Twitter, Snapchat and YouTube, I am not sure if Ofcom was there, but there may have been a rep in the room. This was just before Christmas and was about the then safer phones Bill. It has now been temporarily done away with. Not a single platform had heard of the Alexander McCartney case, and we are expected to believe that these platforms can keep our children safe online, because they tell us that they are doing pieces of work where they self-regulate and keep themselves abreast of the most recent case law or these horrific examples as and when they arise.

Bernie has said that in that case we know of 3,500 young people who were abused. Clearly, hundreds, if not thousands, more children were caught up in that. What is your view on that? Those platforms need to be held to account, but clearly there needs to be a role for Ofcom too.

Jessica Smith: It is absolutely shocking that they had not heard of the case. I am astounded by that. To be clear, grooming children is illegal. The production, sharing of and requesting of child sexual abuse material is illegal. Perpetrators, wherever they are in the world, who are facilitating that activity online are in breach of the law.



Under the Online Safety Act, our requirements now are for services not to allow children to be contacted by unconnected adults. What was happening in the McCartney case was that he was sending out thousands and thousands of requests to connect with children all the time, going through children's friends lists and contacting other children via that means. That should now be shut down by platforms. Children's friends lists should not be visible to people who are not connected to them, and adults who they do not have a connection with them should not be able to request to connect with a child.

There are more protections in place now for children to be able to operate online without strange adults sending them random requests. It is now our job to enforce those rules, to be clear, so we will be monitoring what protections platforms have in place to ensure that children cannot be contacted in that way.

- Q51 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you very much. This is disturbing, fascinating evidence. These are global issues, but our inquiry is trying to understand specifically the high prevalence of violence against women in Northern Ireland. Based on your research, that appears to be mirrored online, if I am reading that correctly from the data, with women in Northern Ireland most commonly reporting that online violence made them unwilling to express their views or disclose the sexual nature of that abuse.

You are talking about intimidation. We had a political culture of intimidation, but it used to be your windows getting done, or graffiti, and perhaps that has moved online. What have you pulled out as the reasons for that higher incidence of online abuse in Northern Ireland?

Professor Jurasz: The survey itself would not give you that answer. We know that it is higher. In response to questions such as, "Why have you not reported it?" or, "Why do you think it happens to you?," women quoted three reasons for why they think that it happened to them. They do apply to Northern Ireland, but the findings are the same across all of the UK, which is also quite a powerful message as to why this is happening.

Women who experienced online violence indicated three reasons why they think it has happened to them. The first was because they were women. The second was their gender or gender identity. The third was the views that they were expressing online. Uniformly across the UK, all women said, "We think that these are the three reasons why this is happening to us."

I spoke earlier about more underpinning reasons for what motivates online violence, which are online anonymity, the ease of getting away with it and misogyny.

- Q52 **Claire Hanna:** Emily and SORCHA have both spoken about the targeting of women in public life in particular. Again, that is probably a universal experience, and I know that every woman in politics gets that abuse. My



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colleague, Cara Hunter, and the DUP MLA, Diane Forsythe, have experienced very specific, false image-based abuse. Is that higher in Northern Ireland? Does the targeting of women in public life, and in politics in particular, occur at a higher rate than in other parts of the UK?

Professor Jurasz: I cannot answer that based on the data. The survey did not ask that particular question. I do not know whether Bernie or Jessica might be able to.

Jessica Smith: I do not know. Anecdotally, we have spoken to a lot of women from Northern Ireland who have had experience of image-based abuse, but I know that that has also been experienced by other politicians across the UK. What is quite remarkable is how politicians from Northern Ireland really speak out about it and are really drawing attention to the issue, which we really welcome.

Bernie McNally: I grew up in Northern Ireland, so I remember the history of the Women's Coalition. Clare, you would remember the disgraceful scenes when people were mooing at politicians in the Parliament. That did not send out a very good message to young people at that time on how to treat women. Someone made a comment to a representative to sit down and shut up and that she was a "silly woman" or something along those lines.

I have had some conversations with Monica McWilliams, who was the Women's Coalition leader at that time. I have just read her book, and it was really shocking. They used to have a sign outside when the peace talks were going on. Every day, these women politicians got abuse, so they put a whiteboard outside their room and decided that the only way to do it was to name and shame. Every day, X person said X to them, so they would write it on the board and put their name beside it. All the other politicians would stop to look at this and it became a bit of a focus. After a while, the guys got a bit nervous, so they used to say to Monica, "Do not put our name on the board today, will you? Please do not say anything." There was a culture there. I assume that, up on the hill at the moment, it is not as bad, but there is a culture and it takes a long time for that culture to change.

Then you have to understand the context of Northern Ireland. We have had a very misogynistic, macho environment in which murder and mayhem was the order of the day, mostly perpetrated by men. The women in those communities were kept down and probably coercively controlled. My old friend, May Blood, may she rest in peace, talked a lot about the community that she grew up in and worked in on the Shankill Road, and how hard it was for the women to stand up to these guys.

I am not sure that a lot has changed. The way that control is exerted now has probably changed. It is possibly not as overt, but, where I live in south Belfast, just on the edge of the Taughmonagh estate, you can sometimes almost feel the coercion at particular times of the year. I just feel that women have not as much of a voice in spite of very great



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politicians such as yourselves speaking out against these things. We now have a change coming across the pond about trans people, gays and lesbians, and it is almost a derogatory term now to refer to someone as a lesbian. These are cultures that are still very much part of our community.

Then you have the religious connotations across both communities. There is a history of religion. Without making any comments about religion in particular, there is a male dominance. I grew up in the Catholic community. I did not and still do not see many women at the altar. Again, in that community, you feel that these women see themselves in some ways as second-class citizens.

Has that culture changed? I do not think that it has changed a lot, and it has gone online. I do not do Twitter or any of those awful things, but I have no confidence in them, really, because we have noticed now that Elon Musk has taken over Twitter and allowed this free speech stuff to emerge.

Online pornography, particularly on Twitter, has become absolutely unacceptable. All this stuff used to be on the dark web, so the kids were not really able to get to it. It used to be down below. Most of it is now up on Twitter. This is really vile pornography. Pornography, in itself, is harmful, but this is really vile stuff that the children are getting access to. We have done some research, and kids as young as nine have been viewing pornography. I am not sure that, at the age of nine, they really understand the connotations of it, but it has normalised pornography.

I am not sure that I have any confidence that any of these platforms are going to change, self-regulate or have good practice guidance, because it does not really work, so we have to start a little earlier. From our perspective, we need to go back to the schools again. We need to go back to the children again.

Most violence against women is perpetrated by men: 90% of women who are murdered are murdered in their own homes by men. These kids are not born bad or evil. We have created these monsters. Some kids in school are asking their teacher, "How do you choke a woman?" Girls who are sexually active between the ages of 16 and 18 are all reporting being choked during sex. Something has changed to normalise this. Some of it can be down to influencers, such as that awful boy, Tate, in Romania. Some of it can be down to people such as that, but there must be something else that is driving this. It is not just the influencers.

Something else is driving this violence against women, and against pregnant women. I remember, when I was working in Downpatrick, we had a sign in the antenatal clinic at our health centre, which said, "At 16 weeks, the baby started kicking, and so did he." A lot of these women who are suffering violence are suffering it during pregnancy.



There is something around coercive control in that scenario, because these people think that they own these women. They are controlling them. They control their devices. They control where they go. They control who they see. Suddenly, there is a little baby involved, and this is taking control away from them. This becomes a focus for the abuse. We had another heavily pregnant young woman murdered in Donaghadee this week. You just have to say, "Where is this coming from? Where are these kids learning this from?"

Q53 Claire Hanna: That is some of what we are going to try to pull out. Everything, from abuse and intimidation to pornography, has all just intensified the access. Colleagues are going to try to drill into some of those issues and, again, why there is a prevalence in Northern Ireland.

I just wanted to come back to something that you said, Professor Jurasz, about monetisation. The fact that this is literally profitable is terrifying. A very high-profile case in the last week or two was the Tattle website, which is literally just a gossip and smear site. When it was online, it was still populated by Google ads. Is there enough regulation in terms of how advertisers are able to profit from this type of content?

Professor Jurasz: In my opinion, no, on the regulation front. I am glad that you came back to this point, because, when we try to talk about violence against women and girls, whether it is online or offline, but particularly when we are looking at online and tech-facilitated forms, it is absolutely crucial to remember the broader context here, which is also one of platforms. The sad truth is that harm is good for profit. We see it through and through. We see it in research. Particularly harm done to women is good for profit.

Just to give you some examples of that, YouTube has earned an estimated £3.4 million from Andrew Tate videos. That is just YouTube. X is estimated to make \$19 million a year from ads on just 10 toxic accounts that have been reinstated. Finally, the Global Disinformation Index estimates that \$235 million are generated annually from ads on disinformation and extremist sites. This is just a drop in the ocean.

When talking about violence against women, we also need to remember that there are so many aspects to it, but there is a very clear economic aspect to violence against women and girls that is threefold. One is the economic profit from violence against women and girls, and particularly online. As I mentioned, there are quite shocking statistics on profits here.

Second, there are economic harms done to women as a result of this violence. We have not really spoken about things such as algorithmic discrimination, but we do have research from our centre showing that algorithmic discrimination is used against women in the context of financial decision-making. For example, many credit-worthy women are declined their applications for credit, and we can show that there is a clear detrimental economic interest there.



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Finally, there is an economic consequence to all of us and to society at large in terms of addressing the harms and trying to redress harms that result from violence against women and girls. The economic aspect of it is quite strong and absolutely needs to be addressed.

Jessica Smith: I will say just a quick word on the monetisation point. The duties on platforms under the Online Safety Act are about taking down illegal content and preventing children from encountering content that is harmful to them. It means that platforms should not be monetising that type of content, but, when we are talking about women and girls, a lot of content is in this grey area, which is not necessarily illegal. There is a recommendation within our guidance, which is that this type of content should not be monetised and that advertisers should avoid attaching their adverts to it, and that it should not be searchable either. The search vector for harmful content is a key one that we want to focus on, but we are not regulating that business end of content.

Chair: The words that I would use, which impacts on women and girls, is that this is porn prostitution in terms of what we see on OnlyFans, and we see that behind a paywall. I do not see it, but it is there. There is that barely legal limit where they are pushing the boundaries, and that all ties into the algorithm on their social media platforms, because you can only sign up to OnlyFans through social media platforms. That is the issue that we have, and this will impact women and girls in Northern Ireland, who will be exploited as a result of it. I just do not think that Government are keeping up to speed with the issues that we have around violence against women and girls online.

Q54 **Sorcha Eastwood:** Just to come in on that point, if we are going to go here, I am going to go here. This is the oldest con trick in the book for women, whenever men abuse us at a certain age, if it occurs at that time. Even way back years ago, it was about the lad culture and the glamour girls—all of that. That is not a new thing. That was on the go 20 years ago. *Zoo*, *Nuts* and all this crap were all about, "Yeah, get your bird on there," blah, blah, blah. "Who is going to get their ... out for the lads?" That has all been on the go.

Exactly as you say, this is now a monetisation. For me, the most insidious thing is that it is convincing young women to prostitute themselves and get a few coin, allegedly, in the process. They are being exploited. It is completely exploitative. For me, the most disgusting aspect of it is that, for some, it is being packaged and sold as, "You can reclaim yourself. You can use yourself." I do not care what anyone says. I know these women. I have worked with these women. I have seen this happen to girls where they have been told, "You can just go out there and reclaim yourself." It is grooming on a huge scale. If no one is going to call it, I will call it. Ofcom is meant to be the regulator of platforms that are there. No one is saying, "This is harmful. This is abusive." This is manipulating women and girls. It is prostitution in a new age.

Chair: It is difficult.



Q55 Dan Aldridge: Thank you, all. This is really important. Two areas that I have worked on in the past are tackling sexual violence and violence against women and girls, and the online world. I have lots of notes and, if you just allow me a moment, I will just go through some of them.

I do not know if any of you have read Shoshana Zuboff's book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. If you have not, it is phenomenal. It shaped a lot of my thinking years ago about the monetisation of some of the baser aspects of humanity, and there is something that we can all probably learn from that.

Social media is one of the most critical questions of our age, and one of the issues that we have is not having the language at scale to be able to identify the things that are going on, such as when we have discrete populations that are specifically vulnerable. The nub of what this Select Committee should be looking at when it comes to Northern Ireland is possibly the legacy of the sectarian angle and how social media and the online world can be used in far more nefarious ways around that. There is a unique perspective to Northern Ireland that I am not sure we are really drilling into at this point. It is becoming clearer to me that we need to do more work and probably more quantitative and qualitative research into that.

We have looked at the role of social media and its impact on VAWG, so I will not ask that question, but one of the areas that particularly worries me is the potential of artificial intelligence and, while we have not even got to grips with the impact of social media yet, what that is going to do, and how parliamentarians, civil society, regulators and industry can do more, in this context with a specific focus on Northern Ireland, to be ready, or at least start to be ready, for the role of artificial intelligence when it comes to this question. I hope that that makes sense.

Jessica Smith: It is a really good point. The Online Safety Act was a long time coming, and the landscape changed significantly during the time that that legislation was being debated and passed. It is a huge risk, and one that we are really alive to in Ofcom around the development of new technology, how it fits within the framework and how it changes what is going on online and the experiences that people are having online.

We did a report on deepfakes last year, and one of the things that is shocking, but maybe not so shocking to those of us who have worked in this area for a long time, is the way that deepfake image creators were disproportionately used to create pornographic images of women. It was an immediate and huge explosion in that type of content. We saw more intimate image abuse reports last year than in all previous years combined, which is completely down to the fact that you can just make them online now.

The law is changing in that regard. What is now the Data Act makes the creation and solicitation of those kinds of images illegal. That will, in some way, come into the online safety framework and will mean that we



need to make sure that sites that are dedicated to creating that kind of illegal content are not accessible and are taken down where possible.

That is not the only challenge. How AI tools are integrated into existing services, the sorts of challenges that they create in terms of misinformation, disinformation, and the creation and perpetration of illegal content and content that is harmful to children are all things that we need to grapple with and that we are actively talking to platforms about. There may need to be future law changes to keep pace with technology.

Q56 Dan Aldridge: That is really helpful, thank you. Olga, you mentioned something about people being motivated by getting away with it, which I thought was really interesting. When we look at the statistics of young people learning things such as artificial intelligence, cyber-security and computer science, there is still a huge gender gap, and it is still vastly predominantly male. It is a problem on many levels.

I wonder whether there is anything in your research that could speak to that. Is there another imperative to turbocharge gender parity and find ways to get more women and young girls equipped with those skills and knowledge?

Professor Jurasz: First of all, we should have many more women in tech and in STEM, just as a matter of representation. Just like we are talking about the representation of women in politics, 50-50 in engineering should not be some sort of unthinkable ideal here, but that is perhaps a different subject.

You are absolutely right. It is predominantly a male field. Tech is predominantly developed by men with gendered assumptions, and we see that coming through. A part of the solution here is to bring more women, but also women with very diverse experiences themselves and from different backgrounds, into the design of tech and of software. It is an absolutely crucial part of moving forward on that.

On the point of AI that you mentioned a little earlier, tech development is moving much faster than the development of regulation. The law is always lagging behind any tech development. Part of your question was, "How do we get ready for it?" I do not think that you will ever be 100% ready for or ahead of tech development, but it is absolutely important to really think critically about tech and AI, not only as this magical thing that, unfortunately, causes bad things and harm, but also how we can use it for good, because we can.

Of course, there are some things that have to happen first. AI needs to be developed with principles of gender equality and non-discrimination at its heart. We need to make sure that what we are pushing for is what, in the centre, we refer to as responsible AI. There are several aspects to it, such as issues of fairness and explainability. For example, can the system clearly explain how and why a particular decision or recommendation is



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being made, and what the factors in that are? Transparency, and the mandating of that transparency, is absolutely important, as are privacy, security and, finally, accountability.

I know that we talk about the accountability of perpetrators and so on, but there is also the question of whether there is clear responsibility and oversight for how the system is developed and deployed. Has it been tested? How many times, and in what space of time? It is not good enough to just test something before it is released, because it can evolve and change. This is especially true when we already know that harm occurs.

It is not impossible to create responsible AI, but it has not quite entered the debate about how we engage as a society with AI as a matter of priority. It is still a side topic, unfortunately.

- Q57 **Sorcha Eastwood:** Bernie, I want to come back to you, because, when I was talking earlier, you were looking concerned. I do not know whether that was because you agreed or did not agree, or because you were listening. In terms of those young women particularly who I was talking about, have you ever met any of them yourself? How do you feel that paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland also prey on vulnerable young women through the likes of brothels and prostitution? How do you think that that impacts on women and girls in Northern Ireland?

Bernie McNally: I have, of course, met a lot of young people who have been coerced. I met a group of young children recently who thought it was great fun. They were making some money. I am sure that there is a different technology now, but they were sharing videos or pictures of their bodies, and thought that there was no harm in that. We identified it only because they had more money, and we were wondering where they were getting that from, as well as their new phone.

- Q58 **Sorcha Eastwood:** Was that literally paid into their account?

Bernie McNally: Yes, they were getting money into their accounts to share. When we and the social worker spoke to the children, they saw it as, "What is the story here? What is the problem? We are making some money out of this now." Once those pictures are up there, it is very hard to get them taken down. It is about trying to get these young people to see that this is not a good thing to do and to be aware of it.

In terms of the influence of paramilitaries, it is hard to know. It goes back to the pervasive culture there. It is not so obvious. Professor Marshall, who was a former children's commissioner in Scotland, did a review of online grooming, as Casey did recently. The question was whether there was a paramilitary or organised crime element to this. She did not find any evidence of that, but that does not mean to say that it is not there, so it is very hard to pinpoint.

Going back to the culture that we have, the "whatever you say, say nothing" approach is still there. Kids will not tell you things. They are not



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keen to tell the police. In some areas, people are still fearful or suspicious of the police, so they are not always able to tell. That is not to say that the police are not doing really fantastic work in those communities. We have a lot of police working with us in the SBNI, trying to increase the reporting and to encourage children to come and tell, and who are very good at working with children.

These kids are like us when we were children. They have their first boyfriend. The boyfriend is online. They think the boyfriend is great. They love him. They are all full of the joys of spring, and then they share a nude picture or something, because that is what kids do these days. But the boyfriend is some 60-year-old pervert from wherever, and they are trapped immediately because the person tells them, "I am going to tell your mum that you shared this photograph. I am going to tell your teacher." Maybe these kids are high achievers in school. They say that their whole career is going to be ruined, and they get very nervous about that.

The police are really good at working with these young people to say, "While it is a crime to share," and all of that, "you are not a criminal. We are not going to criminalise you".

Q59 **Sorcha Eastwood:** The shame is not with them.

Bernie McNally: "The shame is not with you." There is a lot of good work going on with practitioners on the ground, with the whole trauma-informed approach to try to understand these children from a trauma perspective. They are the victims of crime.

It is still very hard if you have done something wrong. I was stopped recently by the police. I was driving. I got so nervous, and I had done nothing wrong. They were doing a road check for alcohol, and I had not had a drink for a week, but I was still nervous when the police stopped me. At my age, there is still a bit of a culture of feeling a bit afraid of the police. The kids still have that. We have to work really hard in schools, youth clubs and local communities to encourage young people, first of all, to tell, especially if they get caught up in getting images and getting money.

Q60 **Sorcha Eastwood:** You have said and shared out loud that children in Northern Ireland are making money, literally, for want of a better phrase. That is not the appropriate phrase. I would say these individuals are being exploited and they are engaged in abusive and exploitive behaviours online. Ultimately, companies are profiting from child sexual exploitation. That could happen to any child in Northern Ireland, as you say. We often layer on these class elements, which is completely wrong. Yes, certain groups will potentially be more vulnerable, but this impacts everybody.

It is also important to state that there is, as you say, a cultural piece there. Sometimes people do not want to ask the questions because they



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are afraid of what they will hear. Historically, we have been working in a very conservative environment in Northern Ireland.

You mentioned our LGBT and trans communities, which at the minute are being absolutely lampooned and abused. These are young people who are either trying to find themselves or who already know they are LGBT. I fear for them. I really fear for them. We know these young people. They are ours. They are our son, daughter, cousin, nephew or whoever.

When you get these online pile-ons that we talked about earlier, they are created into completely and utterly distorted, threatening and disgusting people by people who are absolutely and utterly vile. As a society, we are not wrapping around those young people enough. In a way, that makes them almost more vulnerable.

Bernie McNally: It is all about vulnerability and resilience and trying to build that resilience in young people. I have been a social worker for 40 years. My brothers and sisters used to say to me, "How do I make sure my children do not get abused by paedophiles?" People see this as some stranger coming into their life, but actually it is not.

One of the pieces of advice that I used to give them was to make sure they do not get picked. Guys can pick out vulnerability. I managed the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital for a while in my career. I remember talking to a midwife who said she could pick the vulnerable children from the moment they were born. She could tell which ones were going to do well from the moment they were born. That was from observing the family interactions, the people who came to see the mother, how the mother presented, how the mother dealt with the child when the child was born and all that.

These guys train themselves to pick the vulnerable ones. They know the one who does not get picked up from school right away. They know the one who comes in with a little stain on their uniform. It is the same online. They can pick out the vulnerable ones.

If you go back to Alexander McCartney, he picked young girls who were struggling with their sexuality. These kids were not able to talk about this in school. Because of the culture that they were living in, whether it was in America or Ireland or wherever, they were not able to talk about it so they were seeking out somewhere online to say, "I am struggling with this issue." He was able to get into those sites. He knew those particular children were vulnerable. That added another barrier to them telling.

Paedophiles spend a lot of time working on vulnerability and working on creating these children. I remember going to a lecture at Queen's University one night. The guy was talking about paedophiles. He worked in the Beslam centre, and he said these guys would marry vulnerable girls to have children to sexually abuse. This sort of thing does not just happen on a whim. These guys plan for months and years in advance.



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When you think of them grooming children online, it is quite quick. The online grooming process for children can be minutes. It takes minutes to get the child to trust them. In the real world, it probably takes a longer time, maybe months and months, visiting the family, taking the family out, giving them money, doing whatever, and then they pounce at a later date. Online, it is much quicker, but they still have to plan well in advance. It is not something that happens just on a whim.

Q61 SORCHA EASTWOOD: That is another illustration of why it is so important to create safe spaces, particularly for young people, and to have good, robust RSE in our schools. We know we have been struggling in Northern Ireland to get in, in a consistent way, across Northern Ireland and speak to our young people about issues around sexuality and what consent is.

With that being said, what can the Government do to mitigate and address some of these behavioural changes? That is the \$64,000 question, Bernie. Is that something for UK Government here at the centre or is there stuff that Northern Ireland can do?

BERNIE McNALLY: Again, the Safeguarding Board has a good relationship with our education colleagues. Schools, the Education Authority and the Department of Education all work with us. We have done a lot of good work on bullying. We do plays in schools. We go into the school and we speak to the children through their language. We use play. We use other mediums rather than just teaching because kids do not like to be talked to. We do a lot of work on that. The schools are usually quite receptive to that.

We did a lot of stuff on child sexual exploitation. That was one of our key strategic priorities for three or four years. We really emphasised that selling your body is not a good thing and that the guy who you think is your boyfriend is not your boyfriend; he is selling you to his gang friends. We tried to get all those messages across.

Sometimes it is structural. We get caught up in the politics. Should this be taught in schools? Should it be taught in the home? Should teachers be doing this? The schools try, but sometimes it is down to the ethos of the school. It is trying to get beyond the principal or the board of governors and to get into some of those voluntary grammars up there, which have a lot more control than maybe some of the state-run schools. Schools try within the boundaries they are in.

I am not sure whether you can impose this on schools through legislation. We have to get people to want to do it. We have to get teachers to want to do it. We have to get the right language for them. We have to make sure we do not step over their boundaries as well.

A lot of this has to start at home. A lot of it has to start with the parents. We have to try to educate the parents. Interestingly, in the research that we did with Noel Purdy from Stranmillis, he asked the children, "Are your mum and dad interested in this?" and they said, "No, dad never looks at



my device," or, "No, mum does not care." Only 18% of children said their parents were interested. When he asked the parents, nearly 100% said they were interested and they were trying to find out what was going on. A lot of the parents are doing it surreptitiously. They should sit down with their children and talk to them, but they are looking at their device at night when the children are asleep. The children have it all hidden away in other places, and the parents cannot find it.

Years ago, my sister said she used to track her child's Facebook page, but then he told me he had a second Facebook page that she could not see. This was all fun stuff. This was just to see whether he going to his classes when he was at Queen's. It was not anything more serious than that.

It is about trying to get education to the parents and demystifying the technology. These parents are all younger than me. They are saying, "I do not know anything about technology." Technology has been here for years, yet parents are still saying, "I do not know enough about it." We need to demystify it to help parents understand what is going on and to help them police it, in a way. These children will get their sex education from pornography, if we do not do it that way.

41% of the pornography is on Twitter. The kids are seeing Twitter. Mum says, "What are you looking at?" He says, "I am on Twitter." The mum thinks, "Oh, Twitter sounds all right." Twitter is not all right for what they were looking at. They are getting their sex education from Twitter. They are hearing that it is okay to choke women. They are seeing that the models who are doing this pornography are behaving as if it is pleasurable when they are being beaten or abused online. The kids are seeing this and they think it is normal.

I do not know whether we can do something more with campaigns, general awareness-raising, education, funding some of those women's groups and funding some of those local communities that are doing really good work to help. They are not going to listen to statutory people like me. They are going to go to their local women's group, their local person on the ground or their local representative. Those are the people who they are going to talk to. We have to educate all those people. That takes money, time, resources and a little bit more effort.

We talk about the shift left. Instead of putting all the money here when we are locking them up and dealing with it over here, we should be shifting it all to the left and putting it into those maternity wards and educating those parents who are coming into early intervention programmes such as Sure Start.

Q62 **Chair:** Bernie, on that point, your specific viewpoint on Northern Ireland and online spaces is really rich. The UK Government have the Online Safety Act. That is why we are looking at it specifically. What can the UK Government do to support women and girls and prevent violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, particularly in that online space,



specific to Northern Ireland?

Bernie McNally: I would go back to the point about AI. There are these nudification apps. They could be banned. There is a piece of legislation in England and Wales, which is controlling AI and the ability of people to create these fake images. That needs to be brought into Northern Ireland. It is only here in England and Wales at the moment. That needs to be moved to Northern Ireland.

I do not know whether this is your responsibility or the Assembly's responsibility, but we have an online safety strategy. It took us years to get it. We lobbied and lobbied. We got it about three years ago. Because of the up-down nature of the Assembly, we eventually got the online safety strategy. It got the sum total of £100,000 attached to it. This is going to grow exponentially. We are only starting the journey on online safety.

Q63 Gavin Robinson: Good morning to you all. Apologies for being slightly delayed. It was not my fault; it was the plane's. One of the troubles that we have had with sessions on this issue particularly is about trying to discern a Northern Ireland angle and what we can do from a Northern Ireland perspective. More importantly, we want to understand whether the anecdotes that we share—and we do share them; you have heard some of them today—are reflective of something unique to Northern Ireland? We can point to a higher femicide rate, for example, but are the issues that lead to that unique to Northern Ireland? They may have a separate label or a separate badge, but are they reflected in other parts of the United Kingdom?

We had the PSNI with us two or three weeks ago. We had the detective chief superintendent who was responsible for the public protection unit. She was very strong in acknowledging that the IRA, INLA or loyalist paramilitary drug dealer who attains sexual favours from a young girl, a minor, in exchange for drugs is probably the same predator who sells drugs in Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool or Birmingham. They just do not have the label. It is hard for us to discern that difference.

Ms Smith, I was listening to your evidence around AI-generated deepfakes. I was thinking of the example of my colleague, which Ms Hanna referred to, and her experience. I cannot tell you whether it was an AI-generated deepfake or it was a video that just looked remarkably similar to her, but the impact from a democratic perspective was to try to throw off her aspirations to be elected as a Member of the legislative Assembly. It was during a campaign period. It was done in a conservative constituency in the hope that it would perturb people because the suggestion was that she lived a promiscuous lifestyle and this was an example of it.

When that was investigated, whether it was AI-generated or whether it was just remarkably similar-looking was irrelevant. The issue was it was a video that was then circulated on WhatsApp from phone to phone to phone. The police could see the phones that it had gone to, but they



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could not tell you where it came from. Although I have heard what you have suggested about legislative protection around AI generation, that example opens up the complexity of these investigations. It is really hard to get back to the source.

In the first instance, who should be responsible for getting to the source? Is it possible to get to the source?

Jessica Smith: It is a great question. In terms of intimate image abuse, particularly intimate image abuse directed at women in public life, anecdotally, we have spoken to more female politicians from Northern Ireland about this issue. I know that it happens to politicians across the world. Giorgia Meloni is a high-profile example of somebody to whom it has happened. I do not make any claims about the data, but, anecdotally, from an Ofcom perspective, we know that this is a significant problem for politicians in Northern Ireland.

There are two issues. The first important question is, "Who is responsible for creating the image?" The second one is, "What is the effect of the image? What does the circulation of the image mean? How can the effect of that image being created and shared be contained?"

As we have developed the Online Safety Act, the position in law has been that the creation of a deepfake intimate image has not been itself illegal. That has just changed as of last week, but as we have created our regulations, we have been working from the perspective that it is the sharing that is the illegal act.

In terms of solutions, on Monday, we proposed to move a recommendation in our guidance to our codes. That will mean that services pretty much have to do it or they have to do something that has equivalent effect. The solution is to apply a technology called hash matching, where you effectively create a digital fingerprint of an image, which is then used by all the services through which the image is at risk of being shared. As soon as that image is uploaded to a service, they can see it and take it down.

It is about removing an image at scale. We have also expanded the parameters a little bit so that, if it is a similar kind of image or if it looks remarkably the same, that image will also be taken down, pending review on whether it is indeed illegal intimate image abuse. If that is widely used and picked up in practice by firms—it needs a lot more work at the minute—that is designed to address the sharing and the virality of the content.

The question about the creation of the content is more challenging. Because the law has only just changed, we are just at the start of thinking about how we approach that. We will need to work really closely with the police. We are going to be looking at the issue of how nudification apps and sites that are dedicated to the creation of this content can be shut out of the ecosystem.



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Q64 Gavin Robinson: We did hear from the police that they feel under-resourced, particularly on some of the more tech-enabled public protection issues that they are looking at, such as online abuse and harm. They felt that they were losing resources to other areas. That is indicative of policing more generally in Northern Ireland and the pressure that they are under. They lost 12 or 15 officers to public disorder recently. Those officers should have been looking at online harm and tackling some of these issues. Is there a police service that does it well in the UK, from Ofcom's perspective?

Jessica Smith: It is a great question. We talk to law enforcement about this.

Gavin Robinson: Do you talk to the NCA?

Jessica Smith: Yes, we talk to NCA about how to investigate this kind of crime. One of the things that the police tell us really consistently is about the need for better information sharing from platforms when they know that a crime has been committed. Currently, the reporting loop is very focused on the victim. The person who is at the centre of the image, generally, needs to do that reporting or to consent to having that image shared with the police for the purposes of criminal investigation. There is more to do to unpick that, to make it easier for people to report and to give them confidence that, if they do report it, something is going to happen.

Q65 Gavin Robinson: A colleague of mine spoke to me, as leader of the party, earlier this week to say that they had received a death threat online. It was reported to the police. The police came back to say, "We have identified the image. The image is taken from a dating website in Germany." The image of a gentleman was appropriated from a dating website in Germany, and it is clearly not that gentleman from Germany who is making these threats. The police are coming back again. It demonstrates just how difficult it is to try to pinpoint the individual.

When we think of social media companies, online providers and how well they do in this issue, the BBC has started a new podcast in Northern Ireland called "The State of Us." In their episode last week, they conducted a survey around primary school children, their online presence and their access to telephones. Almost all children at 11 or P7 had access to a phone. Half of them had seen images that were concerning and so on.

Bernie, this touches on something that you were talking about earlier. The children did not want to raise it with their parents for fear that the outcome of that conversation was the loss of the device, rather than a discussion about enabling them to share it so that they can protect them more.

The important thing that came across to me was that almost all the social media platforms that these children had access to were quite flippant about age controls. They said, "You cannot certify the age of a child. If



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these 11, 10, nine, eight, seven or six-year-olds are going to tell us they are 13 or over, we have no way of disproving them.” Is that a failure of Government or is that a lack of willingness on the part of the online organisations and social media companies, which are happy to have self-certification sub-18?

Jessica Smith: It is a really important point. It is something that we have grappled with a lot at Ofcom, as we have developed our children’s safety codes. The law does not require services to set a minimum age. It only requires them to enforce it consistently if they do set a minimum age. We have pushed that requirement as far as we could within the legal framework. Companies that do not have highly effective age assurance in place to apply their minimum age must either implement that or they must assume that there are much younger children on their platform and manage the risks to them accordingly. That would basically mean making your service effectively safe for the youngest children who are known to be on that service. That is part of our children’s safety codes that are coming into force on 25 July.

Q66 Gavin Robinson: A lot of this revolves around chat functions. Roblox, for example, says they do not really have an age limit because they know children are on it. On Minecraft, you can talk to other users. You do not know who that other user is. Are there degrees within that? Is it about the ability to chat, share images and interact on the platform?

FIFA is the same. Kids will go on and play football. Their parents might allow them to tick a box to say they are 13 or 14. They end up in a worldwide accessible game talking to whoever they are playing with. They do not know who they are. Are we just left with the assumption that people are younger than they say?

Jessica Smith: As I said, we are trying to ensure that platforms do apply that check. In any case, platforms will have to risk-assess and then remove illegal content and protect children from encountering content that is harmful to them on the basis of the children’s risk assessment that they have done.

We are aware that chat functions within games can be a vector of harmful content. These regulations are new. The illegal harms regulations have been in place since March; our protection of children regulations are coming into force later this month. It remains to be seen how platforms will respond to some of the rules that are in place. It is our job to hold them to account and to enforce them, ultimately. Within a game, a strange adult should not be able to contact a child. Whatever that does to the functionality of the game, that is what those rules should mean in practice.

Q67 Gavin Robinson: Finally, do you as Ofcom have to tailor your advice given the different legislative provisions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? When England passes a measure, even if it is England only, does the scale of England compared to the other parts of the United



Kingdom mean that service providers will just move with the larger part of the UK and therefore you can enforce guidance or your code across the UK, irrespective of the law?

Jessica Smith: Ofcom is a UK-wide regulator. We have offices all across the UK. We have an office in Belfast and colleagues who engage with organisations in Belfast. For our women and girls work, we recognise that we really need a frontline perspective from across the UK. We did a workshop with over 50 organisations to advise us on how that guidance might be affected by the context in Northern Ireland. We learned a lot from that process. We have a requirement for services to signpost support services. It is obviously useless to signpost support services in England that are not applicable in Northern Ireland. Where relevant and applicable, we try to ensure that the advice and guidance that we give is relevant to the local context.

The online safety laws are UK-wide. That does not mean, however, that we always take an England-centric approach. For example, we are members of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. We have worked with the Executive on the framework to end violence against women. That comes back into my central team to make sure that, where necessary, we are able to tailor our approach to reflect the local context.

Q68 **Emily Darlington:** Gavin has very well explored the harmful nature of some of these chatting platforms, particularly the encrypted ones attached to platforms whose content might be applicable to children. The activity that happens in those chatrooms may not be safe for children.

I have a wider concern. We talk about age verification, yet we do not have a rating system for actual content online like we do offline. We are all very familiar with the British Board of Film Classification rating system. We understand what a U is; we understand what an 18 is. We understand those ratings, but there is no similar system in terms of online content. Even if you go on YouTube Kids, it is up to YouTube to figure out what they think is okay. There is no national standard in that same way.

There is also no signalling on content. My daughters love Mark Rober. I do not know whether any of you know him. He is a fantastic ex-NASA engineer who spends his time making obstacle courses for squirrels using amazing NASA technology. It is fantastic content on YouTube Kids. You are all going to look it up now. By the same token, there is video after video of advertising or unboxing videos, which quite clearly would be regulated if it were shown on television. There are no advertising standards and no listing of those videos as advertising, nor are there proper descriptors around online harms or online promoted harms, such as anorexia. Is Ofcom looking at some kind of age rating system that we expect social media companies to adhere to within video standards?

Separately, Bernie and Olga, should parents have the ability to say, "That video is inappropriate because it is rated 12 and you are eight"? Is the empowerment of parents a part of the solution of not allowing children to go into spaces where they will see harmful material?



Jessica Smith: Our powers under the Online Safety Act are about ensuring that platforms have appropriate safety systems and processes in place to remove illegal content and to prevent children from encountering content that is harmful to them.

There is an aspect of the Online Safety Act about the age appropriateness of content—this is an area that we are working on—which is about what kinds of experiences children need to be protected from at younger ages, for example. We are not looking explicitly at a video rating system because our powers under the Online Safety Act do not enable us to be a content regulator, effectively. That would be quite a big job.

You are right. It will be up to platforms to say, “This is how we are making those judgments about what kinds of content is appropriate for children of different ages.” It is our job to make sure we think those are effectively protecting children from harmful content.

Q69 **Emily Darlington:** If you do not have that expertise, would it be a solution to put online video content under the same regulation as movies, television and games? Video games are under the same thing. There is a regulator that does that.

Jessica Smith: Yes, the BBFC is a classification regulator. We work very closely with them. The decision to extend that system to online content would be a decision for the Government.

Professor Olga Jurasz: On the question about the empowerment of parents, if I understood it correctly, parents and legal guardians have a significant role to play here, but they are not the sole actor here who will action change in that regard.

This is something that my research and the survey has also found. Across Northern Ireland and in other nations of the UK, respondents have identified multiple actors that play, in their view, a role in both the prevention of online violence against women and girls and the response to online violence against women and girls.

What is absolutely crucial here—this comes back to the point made earlier—is education. That is not just education for girls on how to keep safe online or just for boys on how to behave or not behave in a certain way. It is really education for everybody, including parents and society at large, about how to behave responsibly online and having broader digital skills.

It is also a question of the quality of that education. Very often, education about online safety, if it happens, is tagged on to some other subject. That might be—I do not know—responsible sexual behaviours: “By the way, do not share nudes with others.” We really need to rethink the quality of education for responsible online behaviours, how it is conveyed, where, by whom and how often. It also cannot be a one-off. It is an ongoing process.



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Bernie McNally: Yes, the empowerment of parents is the starting point, but you have to see it from a different angle. I remember teaching children when I was a young social worker. In my day, if a child went to the video recorder looking for CBeebies or whatever and they accidentally got dad's pornography, when they put it in they did not tend to look at it because it was boring. They tended to take it out, think, "I do not like that," and keep looking for cartoons.

Look at Andrew Tate. I looked at some of his online stuff. These guys create a product that children will watch and then they put violence or sexual violence into it. If you watch somebody like Andrew Tate, he says, "Guys, look after yourselves. Young boys, get fit. Go cycling. Get into the gym." That is all good stuff. The kids like that and they are interested, but then they get drawn into that world. It is very difficult to discern between the pornography and sexual violence and the good things. A lot of these things are mixed in together. It is not very easy to take it out.

We try to find alternatives that children will watch that do not have all these bad things in. You are always competing. A lot of this stuff is about parents trying to compete. We are saying, "Take them down to the local GAA club and play football. Take them down to the local soccer club or the local cricket club. Play football; play cricket. Play something else; do something else." You can be masculine in that world. Rugby is quite masculine. You can be masculine in that world, and you can have all these good things without all the bad bits. Our guys are trying to go to those various GAA, rugby or cricket clubs and start talking to them about what they are teaching the kids, what the norms are, not bullying the children or saying that violence is a good thing. You are always competing, but it is almost impossible to deal with these things after the genie is out of the bottle. Ofcom will do as good a job as it can, but that is far too late down the road. We have to start much earlier. We have to start competing. We have to get the CBeebies video on, rather than the pornography. The children will pick that because they are self-regulating, in a way.

A lot of that is about them getting good positive messages and contradictory messages to the bad guys. We are always trying to empower the parents and the teachers to have good messages. That goes for the police, the social workers and all the other people on the ground who are working with these kids.

The most important people are the children themselves. This is all about resilience. Why are some children really damaged by this and other children can see it, think it is just terrible and move on? A lot of it is about early intervention and education of the children. By the time it gets to Ofcom taking that nude down, it is too late. The genie is out of the bottle.

Q70 **Dan Aldridge:** I just want to get this on the record. On Monday I met with Peter Kyle, Secretary of State, specifically on the point of digital ID.



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The gov.uk app was launched yesterday. With that app launching for the driving licence and the veterans cards, we are introducing digital ID that can be used. This Government are starting to deliver on those things. We can then go back to the likes of Meta and everyone else and say, "You have no excuse now. Here it is."

One of the questions specifically for Northern Ireland is how the Northern Ireland Office, civil society groups and others making sure that people are using these things and will be ready to use them? If they are not used, this is not going to be effective. Do you have any thoughts? I want to know how we can make the rollout as effective as possible. Since being in this place I have learned not to assume that Departments are talking to each other.

Jessica Smith: It is about how children can use it, in particular. We are very interested in the card that allows a child to prove their age—I cannot remember what it is called, off the top of my head. It is effectively a digital age token for children. It would be a really good step for services to require that.

Ofcom has just started a campaign on highly effective age assurance for pornography. There was an announcement about it last week. Several porn services have said they are going to apply highly effective age assurance. We have now started a campaign looking at users, particularly looking at the group that consumes pornography most regularly, which is young men in their late teens and early 20s, up to about 35. There will be targeted advertising at those groups online telling them that there is highly effective age assurance coming in a compelling way.

The point is that adults have to engage with age assurance in order for it to be effective for children. It needs to be normalised. It needs to be normal that your age will be checked when you go on to a porn site, when you set up an account or something like that. That is how society has decided that we will protect children from this kind of content.

It is about the normalisation of online age checks, digital proof points and all these other things. The application of those might not just prevent children from being able to access things; it might facilitate them using online services in different ways as well.

Q71 Dr Pinkerton: It has been a long and hot session. This is the last scheduled question. I am modest enough to know that it probably will not be the best question that you have heard today, but it is an important one, especially for this Committee. What we are really interested in is the way that the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive interoperate and can work most effectively together.

We all want violence against women and girls to be brought to an end, both in the real world, physically, and online. One of the things that we have heard in this session is that those two things are part of the same spectrum. There is a continuum of abuse and violence.



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Do you have an opinion about how the Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government might work more effectively together in order to bring an end to violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland? Jessica, I am going to start with you, if you have an opinion. I will come to Professor Jurasz and then give Bernie the final word.

Jessica Smith: From the Northern Ireland stakeholders and colleagues who we work with, we can learn about the particular needs, requirements and experiences of women and girls within this context. We need to make sure the conversations that we are having with platforms, the rules that we are making and the enforcement decisions that we are taking about which cases we need to prioritise and take action on take into account that context. It is all about the dialogue, information sharing and informing each other about what is available, what the rules mean and how they can be applied in that particular context.

I come back to my point about intimate image abuse and the experience of female politicians in Northern Ireland. That has been so valuable for us in thinking about how to centre the experiences of women in public life and the protections that need to be put in place to prevent that from happening. We are always so grateful when we get to hear from people with direct experience of those harms.

Professor Olga Jurasz: There is a great scope for UK Government to work with devolved Governments generally, not just in Northern Ireland, on this issue. Online and tech-facilitated violence against women and girls is a global issue, but the harms and impacts are very much local. That really brings together the work in the international sphere, the UK Government's work and the work at the devolved level.

In that context, we should also think about the UK's international obligations in relation to preventing violence against women and girls. I am talking particularly about the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW, which has been around for decades and has quite firmly established what due diligence obligations of state parties are in relation to prevention. The CEDAW committee has expanded that to tech-facilitated and online violence.

The monitoring bodies of these instruments have periodic reviews. As I am sure you well know, the UK will have to come forward and report on what the UK and the UK Government have done. I believe that the devolved Governments feed into that response. In these processes, there is great scope for better co-ordination of the various actions between the UK Government strategy to tackle violence against women and girls and then what happens at the local and devolved level to make sure that we capture the specific impacts that we have spoken about in the context of Northern Ireland, for example, and we have a uniform response across the UK, where that is warranted. We do not want to end up with another fragmented system, where women in Shetland are better protected than women in Belfast or Cardiff or vice versa.



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There is perhaps a piece here to be delivered on that joined-up thinking and an opportunity to bring these efforts together. As we know, every devolved jurisdiction now has a strategy on violence against women and girls. There is a uniform agreement that this is a pressing issue not only for UK Government but for devolved Governments to tackle.

Bernie McNally: Northern Ireland can often be seen as a backwater. Quite often, rules or laws that come in in other parts of the United Kingdom do not come in in Northern Ireland. Abortion took forever, and other issues take forever. There is lots of resistance to what goes on in Westminster. "We are managing our own affairs," "We do not like to be told," and all that sort of stuff comes in. It is not always easy to translate stuff across. When legislation does get translated across, sometimes it gets mixed up and causes more difficulties than it solves.

I would start from the bottom and try to work up with communities. These are issues that start right at the very centre of the nuclear family, with the parents, the family and the culture within the family. They then spread into the immediate local community. That is where we need things like local community women's groups, education groups and Sure Start. That all requires resources, through the Barnett formula, to come across.

If you are putting an emphasis on early intervention and prevention here in GB, that needs to be ring-fenced and translated across. Sometimes it gets translated across, but it gets spent on something else. If you are saying here that resources are going to early intervention and preschool stuff, we have to make sure that actually goes through those local communities. In recent years, people have started saying, "What do you absolutely have to do? You have to have a police service, social services and a health service." That is where all the money gets gobbled up.

You should go down into local communities and do some work with these young boys. I think about that lady being murdered on Sunday, but something like 26 women have been murdered in the last five years. It is just beyond belief. There is all this condemnation of it, but nothing changes for people on the ground. Let us go back to the schools again. Let us go back to the early intervention and prevention and see whether we can prevent this. Ofcom is at the end of the road on this. We really need to be further upstream if we are going to do that. Northern Ireland is no different from anywhere else.

The only thing that I would say is that it is quite a small community. It is fewer than 2 million people. I live in south Belfast, in Claire's constituency. We know all our neighbours and our friends. There is a lot of connectivity. Use that connectivity positively. Use that community spirit.

Gavin mentioned that the drug-dealing gangs who are paramilitaries are the same as the drug dealing gangs in GB. They are not. The drug dealing gangs who are paramilitaries have control of their communities. The drug dealing gangs in GB are not looked up to as heroes. If you have



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somebody who was once portrayed as being the hero of that community who is now a drug dealer, that is not the same as a drug dealer in London, who is seen as a baddie by most people. There is a difference in that scenario.

There is all this talk about transition. How many years has it been since the Good Friday agreement? We have to move on from talking about transition to doing something about it. We have a new generation of children coming through. We have this intergenerational trauma. They are looking up to these guys. They always were bad guys, but they are really bad guys now. They are still being looked up to by people. We have to do something about this.

I talked about creating something else that children will watch. Let us create new heroes for the children. Let us get heroes like May Blood, God rest her. Let us get people like that, who the community can look up to, who are the good guys. That is what I would say.

Chair: Thank you, Bernie, and thank you to all our guests today.