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Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Chair, Women and Equalities Committee
House of Commons
Palace of Westminster
London
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02 November 2020

via email

Dear Caroline,

Changing the perfect picture: an inquiry into body image

“During lockdown I’m free from the judgement, stares and pointing I get every day at school and in the street from strangers. The prospect of going back and to having to put up with that again is scary. Many young people like me will need emotional support to face the burdens in life that comes with looking different.” Ruyuan, aged 16, who has a birthmark

Thank you for the opportunity to submit further evidence to the Committee’s inquiry into body image. Changing Faces strongly welcomes this inquiry and its focus on young people. One of the biggest issues affecting young people’s wellbeing and mental health today is negative body image; further exacerbated for those young people who look different.

86,000 young people in the UK today live with a visible difference: a scar, mark or condition that makes them look different. A quarter tell us they often feel worried or anxious because of how they look; half will be bullied at school.

Right now, Covid-19 is also having a disproportionate impact on the lives of young people with visible differences. Many have self-isolated previously due to bullying and abuse they receive because of their visible difference. Our young clients tell us they are struggling and needing urgent help dealing with increased video calls, difficulties connecting with friends or family, and disruption to their education or employment. Some are at increased risk from suicidal feelings, self-harm, or domestic violence. They’re increasingly anxious as restrictions are re-introduced, and fear going out in public or managing at school, university, or work. Our concern is that this crisis will lead many to regress, negatively impacting their mental health and resilience.

With most mental health problems starting at a young age, early intervention work with young people around body image is vital. Effective prevention and action can help avoid the considerable distress that mental ill-health can cause young people with visible differences and ensure that they look to their future with hope, not fear.

In response to the outstanding questions from the Committee:

What action is needed from social media companies to ensure their platforms aren’t damaging young people’s body image?

Social media is a crucial space for connecting and offering support amongst young people with visible differences, who are already vulnerable to social isolation, anxiety, and exclusion, and have been hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet it can also be a very difficult environment, where they can face a daily grind of exclusion, harassment, and abuse. Many of our community are subject to trolling and online abuse because of how they look – over 40% of young people with visible differences have had negative experiences online, and one in ten say they are repeatedly harassed on social media.

Experiencing this hostility and abuse online has a long-lasting impact. Almost half (45%) of those who have experienced abuse say they have lost confidence in the way they look. One in ten say negative behaviours have stopped them using social media.

We believe urgent action needs to be taken to offer a strong counter-narrative to the idea that online abuse because of how you look can ever be acceptable; rebuilding the trust of our community on social media, and empowering more people recognise and report abuse.

We are proud of the positive work we have achieved to tackle appearance-related hate crime and abuse, and to improve reporting procedures for victims, thanks to Home Office support and funding.

We want social media companies to continue to work with Changing Faces to tackle this issue by committing to and funding a joint awareness campaign with Changing Faces on online abuse.

We would also like to social media companies take the following actions:

- working closely with Changing Faces on engaging with our community; up-skilling users with a visible difference, and improving reporting procedures for people with a visible difference who experience online harm,
- committing to up-skilling reporting staff on explicit appearance-related online harms and the experiences of people with a visible difference on their platforms,
- continuing to improve their reporting and harm detection procedures by consulting and working with Changing Faces and people with a visible difference.

Our experience to date is that government support will be essential to create the momentum for this work to happen.

Have you had any engagement with social media companies on improving body image and mental health of young people?

Changing Faces is committed to working with social media companies to improve the online experience for people with a visible difference. Our work with the Home Office to tackle appearance-related hate crime has helped facilitate partnership activities with Twitter and Facebook, including:

- Twitter delivering bespoke training for Changing Faces' campaigners like Tatyana.
- Twitter 'White listing' Changing Faces on their platform (allowing for complaints made by Changing Faces to be 'fast-tracked').
- Twitter and Facebook contributing to online support tools for people with visible differences.
- Both Twitter and Facebook have provided Changing Faces with free advertising spend – enabling more than 8 million views of our hate crime film and support tools.

We believe that continuing this work will be vital to ensure that online spaces are safe for people with a visible difference.

Will the protections introduced in the Online Harms White Paper protect people from harmful content around body image?

Changing Faces broadly welcomes the Online Harms White Paper. We welcome the news that Ofcom will have an expanded role to help protect internet users. We will be reviewing the consultation document and working with our community to respond.

Changing Faces is committed to continuing to work with Ofcom and social media companies to improve the online experience for people with a visible difference and ensure that any abuse is dealt with quickly and effectively.

What other action would you like the Government to take to reduce poor body image for young people today?

Changing Faces would like to work directly with the NHS to tackle the growing gap in specialist mental health support available for children and young people with visible differences, which has worsened in the wake of Covid-19.

Changing Faces provides the UK's only counselling and wellbeing service for children experiencing mental health problems because of their appearance. Our service includes both counselling sessions and group workshops; often the first-time children have ever met someone else with a visible difference.

Our services are often the only support available for young people and their families. A recent report by the APPG on skin found that fewer than 5% of dermatology clinics across the UK provide any level of specialist mental health support for children and young people. Our service is also currently completely reliant on voluntary funding from our supporters, including BBC Children In Need and Garfield Weston Foundation.

We already work in a partnership model with NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups to deliver our Skin Camouflage service and would like to explore a similar model for our counselling service, so more children and young people can receive the support they deserve.

Finally, we have found that if we can educate young people about looking different and the impact of appearance-related bullying whether at school, in the workplace or in public then attitudes change.

We would welcome government support to help us roll out our new resources to raise awareness about visible difference in schools.

Changing Faces also believes that the Government has an important role to play in ensuring people with visible differences see themselves reflected across advertising and brand campaigns in a positive way. Changing Faces would like to see Government public service information campaigns and civil service recruitment campaigns feature people with visible differences. Leading businesses, like Avon UK, have already committed to our #PledgeToBeSeen campaign – representing people with visible differences in their advertising and marketing materials.

We have undertaken some work with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and would very much welcome the support of the Women & Equalities Select Committee in ensuring more Government departments commit to our #PledgeToBeSeen campaign.

Together, we can better support and represent young people with a visible difference across the UK - driving up standards of care for young people and changing attitudes - with the impact for many lasting for a lifetime.

Yours sincerely,



Catherine Deakin
Director of Fundraising and Communications
Changing Faces