

Written evidence submitted by CensHERship [FEN0024]

Women and Equalities Select Committee Call for Evidence on Female Entrepreneurship

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Who are we and why are we submitting evidence?

- CensHERship exists to level the playing field for women's health content and femtech companies across online platforms.
- CensHERship's research shows that in the women's health and sexual wellbeing sectors, female founders, female-led companies, and female-focused charities experience discrimination across online platforms. This harms their capacity to succeed, grow their audience and sales.
- Examples of this discrimination are:
 - 9 in 10 organisations we surveyed have experienced social media censorship across a variety of platforms in the last 12 months;
 - 4 in 10 organisations have experienced 10 or more incidences of social media censorship across a variety of platforms in the last 12 months;
 - 100% of over 30 organisations who responded to our survey on accessing financial services as a women's health or femtech company experienced refusal of access or difficulties of service across banking, insurance, ecommerce and payment platforms.
- Our mission is to ensure that organisations (including medical educators, charities and companies) working in women's health and femtech (the majority of whom are female) are able to access platforms in the same way that male founders, which is not currently the case.
- Our research is available on censher.com and appended to this submission.

What are the barriers facing women, including specific groups of women such as those from an ethnic minority background, seeking to start and grow successful businesses in the UK?

Our CensHERship research and case studies highlight significant barriers for women at every stage of the business life cycle. These challenges are more pronounced for those in women's health and femtech, where systemic misunderstandings, administrative hurdles, funding biases and marketing restrictions create additional obstacles.

1. **Lack of understanding and support in women's health** impacts female founders in this specific sector.

- For founders operating in women's health there remains a fundamental misunderstanding of the issues they are seeking to address and the need for solutions to help support women's health. This is compounded by a lack of research into women's health (it's well-known that women were not allowed in clinical trials until 1993; and still now [while 70% of chronic pain impacts women, as recently as 2017 80% of pain studies were still conducted on male mice or human men](#)). One outcome of this lack of understanding is the miscategorisation of often innovative and novel ideas and products with the implication that they are 'high risk'. This means they are wrongly thought to be of no interest to customers.

2. Barriers to essential business services

Female founders, particularly in femtech and sexual wellbeing experience significant difficulties setting up the basic administrative systems and processes they need to do business. Our research at CensHERship shows that women's health and femtech companies have experienced difficulties in accessing banking, insurance, payment platforms and ecommerce platforms.

Difficulties experienced include:

- Refusal of service
- Higher fees and slower processing times
- Higher premiums and lack of choice of provider
- Having accounts removed from a platform without any notice and with no reason given
- Being refused service or held to different standards than businesses in other sectors (non-female-founder dominated)

For early-stage companies with limited resources, these barriers impose additional costs in time and money, making it even harder to sustain and grow their businesses.

3. Funding Challenges and Investor Bias

Access to funding remains a major challenge for female entrepreneurs. Women's health and femtech businesses are frequently mischaracterised as high-risk, 'vice-adjacent' or are trivialised by investors.

- Funding issues - less than 2% of VC funding goes to female entrepreneurs and [estimates show](#) that less around 0.4% goes to Black women founders.
- In our research we heard that male funders told period care company Daye that their tampons were too risky to invest in due to the risk of toxic shock syndrome, which is miniscule and a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that women's bodies work.
- In our research we heard that a female Co-Founder of HANX (women's health and sexual wellbeing company) was asked to demonstrate putting on a condom in an investment pitch meeting by a male funder.
- [New research out of the US \(due to be published later this year but shared with The Guardian\)](#) indicates that women's health tech is 'less likely' to get funding if a woman is

on the founding team. The research also shows that pitches from female founders are less likely to succeed if they use phrases such as ‘women’s rights’

4. **Restrictions on marketing and advertising**

- Even when a company finally comes to marketing itself through either traditional advertising (governed by the Advertising Standards Agency), organic social media content or paid digital advertising, they are blocked from doing so in a way that male-founded businesses are not.
- In March 2025 CensHERship submitted six complaints to the EU’s Digital Services Act to show the lack of fairness from large online platforms including Meta, Google and Amazon. The complaints evidence the damaging impact on the growth of women’s health businesses, female entrepreneurship and public access to crucial health innovation.
- Companies taking part include at-home fertility kit [Bea Fertility](#), vaginal health brand [AquaFit Intimate](#), online sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing platform [Geen](#), sexual health and wellbeing platform [HANX](#), breastfeeding support app [Lactapp](#), and gynaecological health platform [Daye](#).
- The evidence CensHERship collected cites multiple cases where medically accurate, expert-led content has been blocked or labeled as “adult content” or “political,” while ads for male erectile dysfunction products continue to be approved without issue.
- Among the key concerns raised in the complaint:
 - **Lack of objective application of existing terms and conditions** - content is removed, restricted for reasons which appear to be inconsistent with the existing terms and conditions.
 - **Lack of transparency and a lack of effective mechanisms to challenge decisions** – Women’s health brands receive vague and inconsistent explanations for content takedowns, with little opportunity for appeal.
 - **Biased policies** – Meta explicitly allows ads for male erectile dysfunction products but restricts discussions around female libido, menopause, and reproductive health.
 - **Financial impact on startups** – Some businesses report losing significant revenue due to blocked ads and suspensions, making it harder to compete and secure investment.

Finally, it’s important to note that this issue has a cyclical effect: anecdotal feedback from male funders to a female sexual wellbeing company said that they wouldn’t fund them because they knew they couldn’t grow their audience and market themselves. We would be happy to expand on this further.

- In addition, because female founders tend to proliferate in sectors like women’s health and femtech, these issues impact female founders the most.

In which sectors of the economy do women face the greatest barriers to entrepreneurship, why is this, and what could be done to tackle them?

Women face the greatest challenges in sectors that focus on health and uniquely female products and gendered perspectives - particularly women's health, femtech and sexual wellbeing. These industries diverge from the traditional 'norm' which has historically been shaped by male-centered data, biases and investment priorities. The evidence collected by CensHERship shows several reasons for the barriers:

- Bias in algorithms and business protocols. Many business services - including banking, insurance, and digital platforms - operate on algorithms and protocols that have been trained on traditionally male-dominated data. As AI becomes more prevalent, these biases will only deepen unless actively addressed. Platforms often find it easier to dismiss objections from female founders rather than invest in changing the underlying systems.
- Male decision-makers and societal stigma. Because investment firms, large online platforms and financial services tend to have more senior male decision-makers there is a lack of appetite to fully understand women's health and change the business protocols or address the challenges we have listed. Topics such as vaginal health, menopause or sexual wellbeing (as examples) have societal stigma and so there is a lack of openness for discussions. This is reinforced by the social media censorship we have identified too.
- Lack of regulatory protection and accountability. There are currently few consequences for companies that treat female-led businesses differently, whether through refusal of service, excessive fees, or arbitrary platform bans. Without legal enforcement, these disparities persist.

We believe what needs to change:

- More investment and funding for female entrepreneurs. Currently just 2% reaches female entrepreneurs meaning it's impossible for them to demonstrate success in business. The onus must be on grant-funders, VCs and other sources of investment to place capital in the hands of women.
- Legislation and regulatory action. Stronger laws are needed to penalize discriminatory treatment and ensure equal access to essential business services. A precedent for this is the EU's *Digital Services Act*, which aims to guarantee equal access to Very Large Online Platforms for all users. Similar measures could be implemented in the UK to ensure fair treatment of female entrepreneurs.
- Education and awareness. Raising awareness among policymakers, investors, and industry leaders about these barriers is crucial. Educational initiatives should focus on the economic impact of excluding female-led businesses, the role of bias in AI and financial systems, and the need for inclusive product development.

At CensHERship we are working on two solutions to these issues:

- Driving change within VLOPs and financial services to remove censorship of women's health content and reduce discrimination towards these founders. We carry out campaign work, education, and legislative pressure on VLOPs. As outlined above, our work involves addressing these issues through submitting formal complaints where possible, and using evidence and research to highlight the issues via media and directly with the platforms so that they can make changes to internal practices.
- Accreditation of service providers who do not discriminate. At CensHERship we are building a world-first accreditation system for service providers (particularly financial services to begin with) so that they can demonstrate that they have open policies and transparent processes around working with female founders who operate in the women's health and sexual wellbeing space. Our plan is to also help connect founders to these providers via a visible 'badging' system for the service providers, marketing and a directory-style website.

How can women best be supported to overcome the challenges they face in securing funding to start and grow their businesses?

We believe this is the wrong question to ask. Women do not require more mentoring, guidance or advice. They simply need more funding and investment.

The reason this is not happening right now is not due to the quality of female entrepreneurs, it is because the majority of funders are men, there is systemic bias amongst these decision-makers and preference is given instead to male founders.

A 2023 [report from European Women in VC](#) shows that just 15% of partners in venture capital funds in Europe are women. Both conscious and unconscious bias held by majority male funders mean that funding generally goes to men, similarly to other bias-based challenges in, for example, hiring and awards where most jobs and accolades are given to those whose likeness and background most reflect the hirer or awarder.

One of the impacts of this is that, even in femtech, male femtech founders raise more money than their female counterparts over a five year period to 2023, [according to Pitchbook data cited in Sifted](#). Similar [more recent data](#) shows that on average femtech companies exclusively founded by women receive 28% of venture capital funding, compared with 38% of the funding won by femtech companies founded entirely by men. Just over a third went to companies funded by mixed-gender teams.

For these reasons, we need to make sure more funders are women - with encouragement (dialogue shift), active recruitment strategies, and education.

What examples are there of best practice in supporting female-led entrepreneurship, both in the UK and internationally?

- Those VC funds, even when led by men, who have actively removed bias from their decision making and actively invest in female founders. We would highlight Calm/Storm as a good example of this.
- Positive discrimination in board member hiring in Scandinavia, especially Norway. Since 2003 Norway has mandated that public companies must have at least 40% female board members.
- Movements to encourage women into investing and in particular into angel investing such as Female Invest (education movement) and Investing Women (angel network).
- The EU's Digital Services Act, which provides a mechanism to challenge VLOPs on fairness and equity.
- The Biden administration's commitment to fund research into women's health.
- FemTech groups within Universities such as Imperial and LSE.
- Dedicated funds and accelerators that are available only to women - the recent Innovate UK grants were heavily oversubscribed and indicate the demand from female entrepreneurs.

What steps should the Government take to help support the development of female-led high growth enterprises?

- Switch focus to male-led VC firms, male investors and male decision-makers to instead break down the stigma and bias among men. It is clear that the many important initiatives already attempted to support women have not worked - because the main change that needs to happen is for more investment to reach female founders.
- Introduce new legislation similar to the EU's Digital Services Act to help try to make sure VLOPs have fair and equal access for all and non-discriminatory moderation policies.
- Review the SIC code categorisation to make sure it is more modern and includes in-demand female-founded sectors such as women's health and sexual wellbeing.
- Create initiatives to support more women to become angel investors.
- Review education / curriculum to build in entrepreneurship and investing education at an earlier age for all genders.

What data exists or is required to track success and monitor progress in female entrepreneurship?

- Numbers of female-led companies now and tracked annually

- Amount of funding/investment awarded to female led companies and mixed gender leadership companies, now, historically and tracked annually
- Number of funders male and female, now, historically and tracked annually
- Growth of women's health and femtech sector which is traditionally female-led - split out by which companies are male-led and which ones are female-led
- Reporting from social media companies on censored posts and rejection statistics as well as detail of reasons given for that moderation and outcomes of appeals on women's health and sexual wellbeing content

CensHERship research data summary appears on the following pages:

Summary 1 - Social Media survey

Summary 2 - Financial Services survey

Social Media Censorship Survey

February 2024

[Updated survey results - September 2024]

CensHERship launched an open call for experiences of the censorship of women's health and sexual wellbeing content online on 1st February 2024.

We have had 95 responses (as at 12 September 2024), which are a mix of brands, creators, medical professionals, charities, consumers, health/wellbeing professionals.

What is the scale of this issue?

95% of respondents have experienced at least one issue in the past year

- 40% of respondents have experienced 10 or more issues related to the censorship of women's health in the past 12 months.
- 17% 6-9 issues
- 44% 1-5 issues

Where is this happening?

- 9 in 10 said they have had issues on Instagram
- Half had experienced an issue on Facebook
- Nearly a third (31%) on TikTok
- One in ten (11%) on YouTube
- However issues across all platforms - X, LinkedIn, Google

Issues include:

- Ad rejected
- Ad account restricted or suspended
- Ad account deleted
- Content (post / reel / stories) removed or flagged as inappropriate content
- Account reach restricted
- Account removed / blocked
- Account shadow banned
- Account reported
- Shadow Banning

Examples shared include:

- A body positive image of a creator in a bikini flagged as inappropriate content
- A sexuality educator reported as 'prostitution' or 'child pornography' when covering topics such as breast exam tips, menstruation facts
- A massage practitioner whose account was deleted 3 times in the last year
- Custom breast prosthesis account blocked and ads rejected
- A campaigner raising awareness of vulval cancer whose account was restricted for the use of the word vulva and vagina
- The breast cancer awareness campaign having to show a male nipple instead of a female one
- ☒ Content from a women's health business conference that got taken down
- The sex education account deleted on Instagram and unable to run any ads for courses on sexual education

- An authority in hormonal health, autoimmune conditions, and chronic UTI/IC who can't advertise on YouTube.
- A brand creating a carousel on Instagram containing the words vaginal microbiome - it was rejected 5 times until the words were removed.
- A brand excluded from Google Ads for trying to advertise a preconception supplement - it has been wrongly categorised as birth control.
- A nude shoulder flagged as sexual content

Impacts include:

- Time lost
- Commercial impact (revenue lost)
- Self-censoring - 53% of respondents said they are now self-censoring to get around censorship issues

What are our respondents saying?

- "We went down from 250 downloads of our app to 50 per week"
- "Our business has taken a £500,000 hit due to this in the last year"
- "I lost literally 2 years of content creation and my sales are 25% of what they were previously"
- "With my account, it's costing lives"
- "I am being silenced because I can't name my own body parts online."
- "Censorship is determined by the key words being used, not the context in which they are used. This means that sexual health advocates are being treated as sexual predators, which is unsafe."
- "Menopause is something that most females will experience and it shouldn't be a topic that is silenced as there is a stigma around it and a lot of people are uneducated so if a brand is trying to educate and spread awareness on something that is scientifically proved to happen, it shouldn't be banned from a platform as big as Meta and TikTok."
- "Female health censorship only perpetuates this continuous toxic narrative around women's bodies. Sexualising or shaming them in a way that causes mental and physical health problems. We need more conversation, more information, more platform space - not less. I can't believe we are still fighting for basic rights in 2024. If men faced the everyday challenges of living in a women's body, this would never be the case."
- "We spend a significant proportion of our marketing budget on paid media, and not being able to use a key channel to reach our target audience is damaging our marketing efforts."

Our respondents are making multiple attempts to contact social media platforms:

- 50% have contacted them 1-5 times in last 12 months
- 25% contacted them 6-10 times
- 3% 11-15 times
- 9% have contacted them more than 15 times in last 12 months
- *A further 13% have never contacted the social media platforms - some citing a fear of further scrutiny of their accounts.*

Yet issues are not being resolved.

We asked how satisfied respondents were with the response from social media platforms:

- 52% extremely dissatisfied and 22% dissatisfied
- Only 2% have been satisfied with the response

Financial Services Survey

August 2024

[Survey results - September 2024]

CensHERship surveyed female founders in women's health, FemTech, sexual wellbeing and sextech to discover if they had experienced discrimination when it comes to accessing banking, insurance or payment provider services.

31 responses - 100% of respondents had experienced issues with accessing banking, payment provider services, ecommerce services or insurance.

Which financial services?

68% said a payment provider - Stripe, Paypal

58% bank accounts - Natwest, HSBC

45% ecommerce platforms - Amazon

29% insurance

Full list of those mentioned: Wise, Stripe, Venmo, Paypal, Cash App, Zelle, Revolut, Amazon, HSBC, Wells Fargo, Starling, Monzo, CardOneMoney, Banze, Banking Circle, MoonPay, Ramp.network, OnRamper, Hiscox, Shopify, Metro Bank, Visa, Mastercard, Tide, Barclays, Natwest.

What issues were experienced?

71% had been refused service or refused an account

58% had an account closed

51% faced excessive scrutiny

35% faced delays in processing

19% faced higher fees or charges

What is the impact of these experiences?

81% lost time resolving issues

65% lost revenue

52% increased operational costs

42% customer dissatisfaction

42% delayed launch

Case studies:

Fertility product company

Our Amazon seller page (for at-home fertility kits) was declined due to use of the word 'vagina' and 'vaginal canal'. But use of the word 'semen' was fine. We replaced the word 'vagina' with 'birth canal', which seems insensitive and crass given we are a fertility product. However it was as close as we could come without risking being banned again."

Women's and sexual health products company

A payment provider pulled our ability to take payment from subscription customers online within 48 hours of launching the company. A bank refused account opening. Another bank excessively scrutinised the legitimacy of our business including incoming payments from investors. This also involved placing a hold

on outgoing payments and receiving funds for a period of time until they were satisfied with their investigation. Third party provider denied access to launching certain products on site, even though major competitor was able to do so. Credits offered to the business for use on third party provider site due to us being a portfolio brand, however when applying for such credits, our application was denied - we assume due to the nature of the business. We're mindful with new applications of the category we choose to put our business in e.g. using health/beauty instead of sexual health or pharmaceutical.

If financial corporations recognised the value of companies such as ours working in women's health/sexual wellness, they wouldn't be so restrictive. For example, the major banking provider who banned our use of their banking platform has now lost out on the ability to transact fees in half a million pounds of international payments.

Pleasure toy company

It's my current insurance - normal ecommerce insurance is around 20-50 pounds per month, mine is over 3,000 a year(!). It's a huge chunk of money that the business could really do with investing back in itself. It also took my broker 2 months to finalise the insurance, which meant I lost out on supplying a national retailer as their pitching window closed.

Feminist pornography platform

When we started, we were refused by HSBC, my personal bank. I found a sympathetic team at JP Morgan Chase - then a senior person found out we were banking there and kicked us out. I operated my business for four years without a business bank account (did it in a way I wasn't supposed to) which made life extraordinarily difficult. I was turned down by numerous other banks during that time. We finally found a home at Signature Bank, now re-named Flagstar. On the payments front, we were refused by Paypal, Stripe, and numerous other mainstream payment apps (too many to mention). On the payouts front, we regularly experience the providers finding their banks suddenly refuse to work with 'adult' - why we had to stop working with Bitwage, and we are currently encountering this issue with MassPay. We work with 'adult-friendly' payment providers (several over the years, and I've talked to many more) who charge extortionate fees (I currently pay out 12% of my monthly revenue in payment processing fees alone) and have shitty UI and admin.

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