

Written evidence submitted by Women in Sport (OSB0105)

Women in Sport

Women in Sport is a charity formed in 1984 to further the cause of women in sport. Our vision is that no-one is excluded from the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport and exercise.

We have a track record of success in securing change, based on our deep understanding of the needs and aspirations of women and girls at each life stage, including menopause. We are determined to break down stubborn gender inequalities through our work within the sports sector and beyond.

Our expert and sector-leading insight is driving innovation, our programmes are providing impactful solutions to tackle gender inequalities, and our campaigning is empowering more women and girls to be active.

Being a woman online

Online abuse of women is widespread both in the UK and across the globe. Amnesty International reports that one in five women in the UK have suffered online abuse or harassment¹. Girlguiding has found that that seven in ten (71%) girls and young women aged 7 to 21 have experienced some form of harmful content while online in the last year. These harms include misinformation and hate speech, appearance pressures, harassment, and bullying².

The government recognises that women tend to be disproportionately affected by online offences like harassment, stalking and revenge pornography³, these offences themselves can often be gendered. Of the one in five women who have experienced online abuse or harassment, almost half (47%) of women said the abuse or harassment they received was sexist or misogynistic, and 27% saying it threatened sexual or physical assault⁴.

Women with a high public profile can also find themselves targets of coordinated campaigns, gendered abuse, and disinformation. A recent study of 13 female politicians across the globe found that 12 experienced gendered abuse and 9 were targeted with gendered disinformation narratives which were racist or sexual in nature⁵.

Data collected in the Annual Bullying Survey suggests that the prevalence of cyberbullying is higher for some groups, such as women, religious minorities, LGBT+, BAME and people with disabilities⁶, and it is important to highlight that online abuse is an intersectional issue. Research from Amnesty International found that women – particularly black, Asian and minority ethnic women Members of Parliament – experience more targeted abuse⁷ and there is a growing evidence-base exposing misogynoir online in the UK⁸

Online platforms are also increasingly being used to perpetrate domestic abuse. 85% of respondents to a Women's Aid survey reported that the abuse they received online from a partner or ex-partner was part of a pattern of abuse they also experienced offline. For half (50%) of respondents the online abuse they experienced also involved direct threats to them or someone they knew. Nearly a third of those

¹ [Online abuse of women widespread in UK | Amnesty International UK](#)

² [girls-attitudes-survey-2021-report.pdf \(girlguiding.org.uk\)](#)

³ [The Online Safety Bill - Impact Assessment \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ [Online abuse of women widespread in UK | Amnesty International UK](#)

⁵ [Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online | Wilson Center](#)

⁶ [The Annual Bullying Survey 2017 | Ditch the Label](#)

⁷ [Black and Asian women MPs abused more online | Amnesty International UK](#)

⁸ [KMi News - Joseph Kwarteng's Spotlight Story on Misogynoir \(open.ac.uk\)](#)

respondents who had received threats stated that where threats had been made online by a partner or ex-partner they were carried out⁹.

Women are suffering offline consequences of online abuse with 55% saying that they experienced anxiety, stress or panic attacks as a result. Over a third of women saying they felt their physical safety was at threat due to the abuse they received¹⁰. A 2017 UK government review found that women were likely to cite intensive abuse on social media as a key factor in preventing them from seeking public offices¹¹.

Online, nearly three quarters (73%) of girls between 7-21 have taken specific actions to avoid being criticised such as refraining from posting on social media or holding back their opinions. Boys are both less likely than girls to experience abuse and less likely to take action to avoid being criticised¹². Of women who have experienced some form of online abuse or harassment, 24% of women said they'd stopped posting content that expressed their opinion on certain issues due to online abuse they had experienced¹³.

While mainstream social media platforms (including Twitter and Facebook) have guidelines and rules banning harassment, most of the women Amnesty International polled rated the response to online abuse or harassment from the relevant institutions to be inadequate. Only 23% of Facebook and 19% of Twitter users rated the platforms' response in addressing online abuse or harassment as adequate, versus 41% and 43% who considered it inadequate¹⁴. Reality TV Star, Amy Hart recently reported to the DCMS Committee that she had giving up on reporting abuse due to the lack of action¹⁵

Being a sportswoman online

When it comes to sportswomen, the picture is much the same. According to a 2020 survey, almost a third of sportswomen experienced trolling on social media¹⁶. Of the 339 participants across 40 different sports, nearly 50 elite sportswomen said they had been criticised on social media about their appearance.

Anecdotally, elite sportswomen report experiencing a wide range of online abuse and harm. Patron of Women in Sport and Olympic gold medallist swimmer, Rebecca Adlington describes a "decade of trolling" and sexist comments about her online, largely focusing on her appearance¹⁷. Olympic gold medallist hockey player, Susannah Townsend's Instagram was hacked, and her name was changed to 'come in my face'¹⁸. Welsh Rugby Union international, Elinor Snowsill describes the relentless private messages she receives as sometimes feeling "a bit like harassment". A key gender difference in this regard is that sportswomen report receiving criticism and abuse overwhelmingly based on their characteristics as opposed to their athletic performance.

While increased coverage of women's sport is to be welcomed and encouraged, it does not come without repercussions. Birmingham footballer, Lucy Quinn has explained that as women's football gains more of a platform, players are seeing more and more offensive comments and direct messages¹⁹. Sky

⁹ [Online and digital abuse - Womens Aid](#)

¹⁰ [Online abuse of women widespread in UK | Amnesty International UK](#)

¹¹ [Intimidation in Public Life - A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

¹² [Almost half of girls aged 11-18 have experienced harassment or bullying online | Plan International UK \(plan-uk.org\)](#)

¹³ [More than a quarter of UK women experiencing online abuse and harassment receive threats of physical or sexual assault - new research | Amnesty International UK](#)

¹⁴ [Online abuse of women widespread in UK | Amnesty International UK](#)

¹⁵ [Love Island's Amy Hart gives up on reporting shocking online abuse | Metro News](#)

¹⁶ [Social media trolling: Sportswomen speak about their experiences - BBC Sport](#)

¹⁷ [Even After 10 Years, Rebecca Adlington Is Still Being Trolled. This Is How She Manages | HuffPost UK Life \(huffingtonpost.co.uk\)](#)

¹⁸ [Social media trolling: Sportswomen speak about their experiences - BBC Sport](#)

¹⁹ [Women's football can overcome 'pointless' online abuse, says Lucy Quinn | The Independent](#)

Sports has also recorded an increase in misogynistic posts after it expanded coverage of women's football²⁰.

The ramifications for sportswomen can be severe. Rebecca Adlington described the impact on her mental health, including panic attacks following her retirement from swimming²¹ and former footballer and sports pundit Alex Scott revealed that she went to therapy as a result of struggling to cope with online abuse and trolling²². One respondent to the BBC's Elite British Sportswomen's Survey said she considered quitting her sport after "horrific" online abuse following a poor performance²³.

Social media companies have been slow to take action against the online abuse faced by sportswomen. Susannah Townsend testifying that she couldn't get her hacked Instagram account taken down for about a week and that "there wasn't anyone who could help me"²⁴. Edleen John Co-Partner for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Football Association, has already testified to the Online Safety Bill Committee that several players "have been blocked by social media companies from reporting the volume of abuse that they are receiving"²⁵.

Draft Online Safety Bill

Women in Sport welcome the aim of the Online Safety Bill to address prevent harm to individuals in the UK, impose a duty of care on providers of user-to-user services and search services, and provide OFCOM with the powers necessary to oversee regulation of this. There are some areas, however, where the Bill could be further strengthened to achieve these aims.

The Bill needs to further define "content harmful to adults" and "content harmful for children". Under section 45 and 46, legal but harmful content is defined for both adults and children as that which "the provider of the service has reasonable grounds to believe" has "a significant adverse physical or psychological impact". In leaving it open to interpretation by the provider, we do allow for new harms that emerge in the future to be included, but we also allow for potentially loose interpretation as to what content has "a significant adverse physical or psychological impact". The threshold for psychological or physical harm is thus not well defined and if it is interpreted as being too high then the Bill may not succeed in protecting women and all individuals in the UK from some online harms.

The Bill also fails to clarify whether providers of the service should assess harm based on each individual piece of content, or the impact of a cumulation of content. While an individual piece of content may fail to meet the threshold of "significant adverse physical or psychological impact", a targeted campaign of multiple items of content (for example, online "pile-ons" by multiple users and campaigns of harassment by individual users) could well meet this threshold. **To adequately protect women, girls and all individuals from online harms, it is vital that this Bill explicitly specifies that providers must take into account the impact of cumulative content.**

We welcome that the current definition for harmful content for both adults and children includes "content which may reasonably be assumed to particularly affect people with a certain characteristic (or combination of characteristics), or to particularly affect a certain group of people". **However, we would like to see misogynistic and gendered abuse, harassment and disinformation²⁶, explicitly recognised as "harmful content"** either by the Bill itself or by its designation as "priority content" by the Secretary of

²⁰ [Sky Sports tries to tackle online abuse after lockdown surge | Football | The Guardian](#)

²¹ [Even After 10 Years, Rebecca Adlington Is Still Being Trolled. This Is How She Manages | HuffPost UK Life \(huffingtonpost.co.uk\)](#)

²² <https://twitter.com/AlexScott/status/1229343160771530752?s=20>

²³ [Social media trolling affects almost a third of elite British sportswomen, BBC Sport survey finds - BBC Sport](#)

²⁴ [Social media trolling: Sportswomen speak about their experiences - BBC Sport](#)

²⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2695/html/>

²⁶ [Free-Speech-For-All-2021-08-FINAL.pdf \(hopenothate.org.uk\)](#)

State. This is particularly important given that misogyny is not currently considered a hate crime in the UK, and we would also welcome further recognition that the nature of misogynistic “harmful content” is often intersectional.

The Bill must address inadequate reporting systems and handling of online abuse and harassment.

Section 11 states that services have a “duty to specify in the terms of service” how “priority content” and “other content that is harmful to adults” should be “dealt with by the services”, but it fails to set standards as to what “dealt with by the services” consists of. With women reporting a lack of action in response to their reports, and some even being blocked by social media companies from reporting high volumes of abuse, it is clear that the current reporting systems and the way in which cases are “dealt with by the services” is failing to keep individuals safe from online harms.

By comparison, the “safety duties for services likely to be accessed by children” includes “proportionate steps to mitigate and effectively manage the risks of harm”, a duty to “mitigate the impact of harm from content that is harmful”, and “a duty to operate a service using proportionate systems and processes designed to...” prevent children from encountering “priority content that is harmful”. **Women in Sport would like to see the same “safety duties” also afforded to adults.**

Safety duties protecting adults should be extended beyond “Category 1” services. The decision to limit regulation of “content harmful to adults” to Category 1 services, effectively fails to protect individuals from online harms on many of the smaller platforms. While larger platforms enable online harms to potentially reach an enormous audience, “content harmful to adults” but not quite researching the threshold of illegal can flourish on smaller platforms, deemed to be outside of the scope of regulation. In fact, when a larger platform is perceived as inhospitable to harmful content, users have been observed to join smaller platforms where they can continue to share such content²⁷. **Women in Sport would like to see the safety duties protecting adults extended to all user-to-user services.**

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²⁷ [The Online Safety Bill: Will it protect women online? - Demos](#)