

Written evidence submitted by Girlguiding (COR0163)

Overview

1. As the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, our submission is focused on our evidence of girls and young women's experiences of online harms - both during this crisis as, well as research we've collected as part of the wider context of girls lives online over the past decade.

2. Our research shows that girls face particular gendered pressures online and that some of these have been heightened during the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown. We believe that the experiences of girls and young women should be listened to and taken seriously, and that their experiences should be considered in the development of measures and decisions during this difficult time.

Relevant evidence

3. The [Girls' Attitudes Survey](#) is Girlguiding's annual research project into the lives of girls and young women, aiming to build a comprehensive picture of the emerging needs, issues and priorities of girls and young women today. The survey provides a snapshot of the views of over 2,000 girls and young women from across the UK aged 7 to 21, within and outside Girlguiding. Each year the findings build upon those of previous surveys and cover a range of issues affecting girls from education, health and wellbeing, aspirations and safety on and offline.

Online Harms White Paper 2019

4. In June 2019, [we responded](#) to the government's consultation on its Online Harms White Paper. A summary of our recommendations are;

- We support the recommendations made by the End Violence Against Women coalition (EVAW) - particularly those relating to violence against women and girls (VAWG) needing to be recognised and included within the strategy, the need for the emphasis to be on challenging perpetrators rather than all users having to 'stay safe' and the need to 'future proof' the strategy to keep pace with the changing picture online.
- Policies, procedures and reporting mechanisms must be clear and accessible to children and young people.
- The action taken to address reported harms should also be clear and available to the public.
- The regulator should have the power to hold companies to account against the new laws.
- The Strategy should take into account other important work such as that of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the consultation on the digital rights of the child; the Information Commissioners work around a digital design code to protect children online and the UK cross-governmental VAWG strategy. It should also complement, take into account and inform Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education lessons that teach children and young people about safety online.
- The regulator must take the specific gendered harms facing girls and young women into account - as well as all protected characteristics under the Equality Act to understand and tackle the specific pressures facing these groups.
- As well as social media sites, the regulator should consider and monitor other online spaces where girls and women receive abuse and harassment - such as in gaming.

[COR0163]

- The duty of care should include:
 - Making it easier to report concerns and remove distressing content
 - Protections for children under the lower age limits of platforms (to take into account that many younger children are accessing these)
 - Transparency about what reports they get, who reported them, what the outcomes were and what they're doing to tackle the issues.
 - A responsibility to tackle body image pressures and other specific, gendered pressures facing girls and young women and a celebration of diverse types of women online
 - Proper recognition across the issues of bullying, harassment, sexism and gender norms.
- Online sites should indicate that images on their platforms are likely to be altered to help address the appearance pressures faced by children and young people (and girls and young women specifically).
- We'd like to see evidence of an understanding across media (including online) of the ways in which the representation of gender stereotypes can directly harm and limit children's views of themselves and their choices.
- Sites need to respond quickly and effectively to reports of adult content on their platforms.
- Regulators should be up to date with how children and young people use the internet and their interaction with different sites to help them determine the highest risk content
- Arrangements to ensure the strategy works on a global basis should be clearly outlined.
- Girls and young women should be involved and consulted in designing safe products.

Covid-19 and girls lives online

5. Our research, ['Early findings on the impact of Covid-19 on girls and young women'](#), conducted in early May 2020 reveals, whilst not surprising, girls and young women are spending more time online during lockdown. Some of this is positive as they connect to others and use it as a tool to learn. But with increased time online, girls are facing increased pressures from social media around their appearance and what they're doing. The crisis has increased their concern about fake news.

Girls tell us some of the positives of being online during this time:

- 85% have spent more time on social media (aged 15-18)
- 78% have used new apps and games to communicate with friends and family (aged 15-18)
- 63% have watched more TV, shows, films and videos, including online (aged 11-18)
- 36% have played more video games or online games (aged 11-18)
- 51% have gone online more to learn something new (11-18)

[Zooming with family and friends helps me feel better \(Girl, 11-14\)](#)

6. However, with more time being spent online, those aged 15-18 tell us they're also facing more pressures:

- 28% feel more pressures to be productive and share the things they've achieved on social media

[COR0163]

- 26% feel more pressure to look a certain way on social media, e.g. lose weight or exercise
 - 20% feel more pressure to be online all the time
- 'I think girls are struggling with pressures to use this time to lose weight and get a 'summer body'.' Young woman, aged 15 to 18*

7. The crisis has also increased girls and young women's concerns about fake news:

- 43% of young women aged 15 to 18 feel more worried about fake news and what information they can trust

'I hate all the misinformation.' Young woman, 15 to 18

8. Girls and young women want to feel like their voices and concerns have been heard and are taken seriously. Like many of us, their daily lives have radically changed, and they need accurate and reliable information to help them navigate this uncertain time. Those aged 11-18 tell us about what they want:

- 90% want more information about what to expect in the future (e.g. re-opening of schools)
- 65% would like to know where to get trustworthy information that is for children and young people
- 61% would like more information directly from government to children and young people
- 48% feel all the advice and information about coronavirus has been for adults
- 74% want to get information about coronavirus from the government, followed by parents /cares (58%) and the news (58%)

Safety online

9. Our wider research shows that online abuse and harassment is an issue that particularly affects girls and young women. We are concerned that with the current situation, where people are using the internet more, girls and young women are at a higher risk of harassment and abuse online and could be exposed to unwanted sexual imagery and harmful content. Reports by the Internet Watch Foundation¹ and Barnardo's² have also reflected these concerns.

Our 2019 Girls Attitudes Survey revealed that

- 39% of girls and young women aged 11-21 have seen upsetting or harmful images/videos online which they wish they hadn't

In 2018 we asked girls about their experiences online:

- 47% aged 11-21 had experienced unkind things said to them on social media
- 25% aged 11-21 had experienced threatening things said about them on social media
- 24% aged 13-21 had experienced sexist comment made about them online
- 24% aged 11-21 had been sent photos or content by someone they knew that they'd found upsetting
- 22% aged 11-21 had embarrassing photos of them sent to other people at school/college/uni/work

¹ <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news/%E2%80%98terrifying-escalation%E2%80%99-battle-to-keep-children-safe-online-as-new-figures-reveal-300-000>

² <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/barnardos-warns-parents-online-dangers-children-schools-close>

[COR0163]

- 8% aged 13-21 had photos of a sexual nature sent to other people at school/college/uni/work

And how they respond to offensive behaviour online:

- 79% aged 7-10 would tell their parents or carer
- 46% aged 11-21 would delete the post or hide the person being rude
- 46% aged 11-21 would report it to the social media site (an increase since 2013 when just 23% said this is what they would do)
- 25% aged 11-21 would ignore it (a decrease since 2013 when 39% said this is what they would do)

In 2017 we asked about their top worries online:

- Threats from strangers (64% aged 7-10, 43% aged 11-16, 26% aged 17-21)
- People pretending to be someone else online (61% aged 7-10)
- Grooming (45% aged 11-16)
- Bullying (50% aged 7-10, 36% aged 11-16)
- How a picture might be used (40% aged 7-10, 34% aged 11-16)
- Seeing rude pictures (53% aged 7-10)
- Seeing unwanted pornography (35% aged 11-16)
- Sexual harassment (32% aged 17-21)

10. We also found that 22% of girls aged 7-10 say their parents post pictures of them on social media without asking for their permission.

Online pressures and mental health

11. Our research shows that girls' and young women's happiness has declined in the last decade. And that the pressures and harassment they experience online can contribute to how they feel. With increased worries and uncertainty at this time, alongside increased pressures including online, we expect their happiness to be negatively impacted. Our research shows, that even before this intensified period, social media can be a significant pressure for girls:

- 59% aged 11-21 say pressure from social media is one of the main causes of stress (2018)
- 45% aged 11-21 check their phone first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and 41% of them say they'd like to spend less time on social media (2019)

[Girlguiding activity during coronavirus](#)

12. We believe that having an adventure is trying something new for the first time, it's embracing play and making the everyday extraordinary - and we need to make sure children and young people can still experience this even during current crisis. That's why Girlguiding has launched it's online offer - [Adventures At Home](#) - a range of activities to help children, parents and carers find simple ways to create fun, adventure and boost wellbeing. Adventures At Home provides weekly activities for children and young people to build their wellbeing in fun and playful ways at home.

[About us](#)

13. Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with over 500,000 members. Thanks to the dedication and support of 100,000 amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We

[COR0163]

run Rainbows (4-7 years), Brownies (7-10 years), Guides (10-14 years) and Rangers (14-18 years). Registered Charity No. 306016.

May 2020