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## Youth Select Committee 2017: Inquiry into body image Girlguiding response

### About Girlguiding

1. 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 run Rainbows (5-7 years), Brownies (7-10 years), Guides (10-14 years) and The Senior Section (14-25 years). Registered Charity No 306016. [www.girlguiding.org.uk](http://www.girlguiding.org.uk)

### Key messages

- We are for all girls
- We give girls their own space
- We give girls a voice
- We change as the lives of girls change

### About our evidence

2. Girlguiding's submission focuses on evidence from our annual Girls' Attitudes Survey - the largest survey of girls and young women in the UK - which gathers the views and opinions of over 1,600 girls and young women throughout the country aged 7-21, from inside and outside guiding. For more information and data on the latest and previous reports please see [www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes](http://www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes).
3. Our response includes quotes from members of our youth panels. Our Advocates are a group of 18 Girlguiding members aged 14-25 who lead the direction of Girlguiding's advocacy and research. Our British Youth Council (BYC) Delegation has 10 members aged 14-25, who work with other BYC delegates to campaign for change and improve young people's lives.

### Overview

4. Girlguiding is excited to contribute to the Committee's inquiry on this important issue. Our research has often focused on girls' body image anxiety and we have actively called for actions we feel will address this. Throughout our response - which is organised according to the question numbers in the terms of reference - we outline our evidence on issues such as the impact of widespread objectification of women in the media, online abuse, and sexual harassment in schools on girls' body confidence. We also include quotes and personal stories from our youth panel members. Although we know body image anxiety affects boys, as the UK's leading organisation for girls, our



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submission focuses on the particular pressures facing girls around body and appearance.

## Consultation Questions

### Question 1

#### Trends in girls' body confidence

##### **Worsening body image anxiety**

5. Our research shows girls are significantly affected by body image anxiety and that this issue is growing worse over time. In 2011, 73% of girls aged 7-21 were happy with how they looked, falling to 61% five years later in 2016.

Our 2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed that just 14% of girls aged 11-16 and 7% aged 17-21 are very happy with how they look compared to 45% of 7-10 year olds - although this still leaves more than half of young girls unhappy with how they look. In addition:

- 17% of 7-10 year olds, 51% of 11-16 year olds and 59% of 17-21 year olds feel they should lose weight;
- 23% of 7-10 year olds, 46% of 11-16 year olds and 61% of 17-21 year olds feel they need to be perfect;
- 40% of 7-10 year olds feel embarrassed about their looks and 65% of 11-16 year olds and 78% of 17-21 year olds feel ashamed about how they look.

##### **Importance placed on appearance**

Our 2016 Survey also revealed that:

- 47% of girls aged 11-21 say the way they look holds them back most of the time;
- 36% of girls aged 7-10 and 53% aged 11-21 say people make them feel their looks are the most important thing about them;
- 35% of girls aged 7-10 and 75% aged 11-21 agree that women are judged more on their appearance than their ability.
- 42% of girls aged 11-21 said for women to be successful, they have to be attractive as well as good at what they do, whereas for men, it doesn't matter what they look like

*"The way you look is seen to be much more important than worrying about any other problems."* (2016 Girls Attitudes Survey Participant, aged 11-16)

*"I'm embarrassed to do certain things because of my body."* (2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey participant aged 11-21).

#### **Impact of constant criticisms of girls' appearances**

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Girls' body confidence is also affected by people criticising their bodies. Our 2016 Survey showed that 61% of 11-21 year olds had experienced this and that it stops them from:

- Wearing clothes they like (58%)
- Having their picture taken (52%)
- Playing sport (39%)
- Speaking up in class (36%)
- Going to certain places (33%)
- Using social media (25%).

When asked what the top way to improve girls' lives would be, 54% of girls aged 7-10 said for people to 'stop judging girls and women on what they look like'.

### **Impact of the media**

6. Such criticism of female bodies is disturbing but not surprising considering the frequent sexist and stereotyped portrayals of women in the media.

Our Girls' Attitudes Survey shows that:

- 88% of girls aged 11-21 think newspapers and magazines should stop criticising women's bodies (2016);
- 70% of 11-16 year olds and 80% of 17-21 year olds agree women are too often shown as sex objects in the media and that this makes them feel disempowered (61%) (2016);
- 75% aged 11-21 say that women shown in the media are too much alike (2014);
- 75% aged 11-21 say there are too many images of naked/nearly naked women in the media (2014);
- 80% aged 11-21 believe there is too much discussion of women's weight (2013).

Our 2013 Survey showed that girls are aware of advertisers' use of airbrushing to create and present idealised female bodies:

- 51% of 7-11 year olds know images can be altered to 'improve' models' appearances, by ages 9-11, it's 60%;
- 73% of 11-21 year olds believe magazines should label airbrushed images.

However, despite this awareness, girls tell us that negative and unrealistic portrayals of women's bodies still have a negative impact on them:

- 72% of 17-21 year olds feel anxious about their appearance due to criticism of celebrity bodies
- 56% of 11-21 year olds say they want to look more like women in the media;
- 21% of 11-21 year olds have tried a diet after a celebrity has used it.

### **Exposure to inappropriate sexual content**



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7. Girls are also exposed to inappropriate sexualised content that affects how they view their bodies. Our 2015 Survey revealed that 70% of aged 13-21 think online pornography contributes to women being treated less fairly.

Of girls aged 17-21:

- 87% thought it creates unrealistic expectations of what women's bodies are like
- 80% thought it encourages society to view women as sex objects
- 78% felt it encourages gender stereotyping

### Sexual harassment in school

8. In 2015 49% of girls said anxiety about potential sexual harassment affects their body confidence.

### Other evidence

9. International evidence shows that the UK does particularly badly when it comes to girl's wellbeing, both compared to other countries, but also to boys within the UK when it comes to poor body image.<sup>1</sup>

### Question 2

10. Girls say more needs to be done to tackle the challenges faced by girls from different backgrounds and with different identities. Members of our youth panels shared some thoughts and personal stories on this topic:

*"I feel that often LGBTQ+ girls may come across barriers that prevent them from feeling comfortable within their own body. Unfortunately these barriers only become more prominent due to societal expectations to fit in and schools not allowing girls to wear the uniform of the gender they identify with." (Emma, BYC Delegate, 16)*

*"As a young woman in a same sex relationship, I often feel as if there's a pressure on how I look. Both me and my partner dress as we please, in skirts and dresses and look like society's idea of what straight women look like. I often feel as if people think that one of us should dress like a man so that we look like we are conforming to society's idea of a heterosexual couple. This creates an unnecessary stress in our relationship." (Senior Section member, 22)*

*"It's an understatement to say that there are challenges around body anxiety faced by women of colour. Colourism (shadeism) is a serious issue within communities of colour. As a young black woman, I have experienced this first hand.*

*My darker complexion and African features, full lips, broad nose and afro hair are all clear indicators that I am on the far end of meeting the European set beauty standards of*

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Society (2015) 'The Good Childhood Report 2015'



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*this country. I have been deemed unattractive, manly and ugly. And this was just from friends at school.*

*It's no secret that Britain is a predominantly white country, therefore naturally the media would reflect the majority. So not only is there a lack of black people and women in the media but a lack of black women. I'd go further to say, a lack of dark skinned black women. When the media does show black women, they, in some way meet European beauty standards, lighter skin, looser curls, European facial features. When it's a dark skin black woman, and sometimes just any black woman, the portrayal is negative. Growing up, young black girls and everyone else would associate being a black woman with being big and loud. If your physical appearance is paired with negative personality traits that too creates body anxiety.*

*Because of my treatment at school and what I saw around me, I suffered from body anxiety. I hated myself and resorted to skin bleaching and straightening my hair to "rectify" the "problem". I found that trying to address the issue of colourism is where the racism would come about. Non-black people would argue it wasn't a problem or wasn't serious. Their lack of understanding of how colourism is rooted in racism is what made it racism. Even in the black community alone, darker skinned people are seen as less attractive and are bullied and made fun of. This is partly the reason why it's not taken seriously.*

*My school did not know how to deal with the issue of colourism and bullying. In my final year, one of my teachers brought two Year 7 girls to me. They explained their friend has low self-esteem due to being bullied by boys in her year since September, for being a dark skinned black girl and having afro hair. I spoke with her and she was not aware it was colourism, no one was aware. Some considered it to be racism but the boys bullying her were black. My teacher did not know what to do this was NOT a new experience but she and everyone in that school were not equipped to handle such an issue." (Jemmar, BYC Delegate, 20)*

### **Question 3**

#### **Taking gendered pressures into account in campaigns**

11. Girlguiding believes it's vital that campaigns take into account the specific gendered pressures which affect girls' body confidence, such as - as covered previously - anxiety about sexual harassment in school, online abuse and harassment, and sexism and gender stereotyping in daily life.

In addition, we know that the negative, stereotyped and sexualised portrayals of women in the media also contribute to their anxiety. Our 2014 Survey showed that 76% of girls aged 17-21 think campaigns can improve how women are represented in the



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media. We believe it's important that campaigns consider the challenges of young people from different groups (see previous answer).

*"The vast majority of girls experience some kind of anxiety about their body at some point, largely due to the idealisation of the "Perfect Woman" in today's media. This anxiety would be greatly increased for girls who exist outside of what society considered "normal" (for example if they are non-white, disabled or part of the LGBTQ+ community) as society's impossible body standards will seem even more unattainable.*

*As far as I'm aware there is pitiful support in place to deal with this issue outside of small-scale social media accounts which celebrate diverse beauty. Widespread and more structured support is desperately needed, such as requirements for advertisers to include diverse groups of women." (Katie, Advocate, 16).*

#### Question 4

##### **Online sexism and abuse**

12. Our evidence shows that social media can be an important way for young women to connect, learn and have their voices heard. However, it can also have a negative impact on girls' body confidence. For example, they feel bombarded with sexualised images and are often subject to online abuse.

Our 2016 Survey showed that **80% of girls aged 11-21 think more should be done to tackle sexism and abuse online.** In addition:

- 50% think sexism is worse online than offline
- 21% have had sexist comments made to them
- 25% of girls aged 11-21 had experienced cyber-bullying, rising to 41% among those identifying as LGBTQ+
- 5% aged 13-21 had a sexual photo of them shared without their consent
- 8% of girls had experienced homophobic or biphobic comments, rising to 37% among those identifying as LGBTQ+

Girls' fears of abuse have led many to hide their identities online:

- 55% of 11-21 year olds feel safer sharing their views anonymously
- 24% of 13-21 year olds have at least one anonymous social media account

Girls' body confidence can also be affected by comparing themselves to friends' most glamorous pictures or to styled and air-brushed celebrities. Our 2016 Survey showed 37% of girls aged 11-21 **compare themselves to celebrities** most of the time or often.

*"I think the Government need to realise how much social media affects the self-esteem of girls. It's not as simple as someone maybe commenting "fat" on your photo anymore. It's seeing celebrities and Instagram models etc. who present their lives to be so perfect*



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*when in fact it is totally unrealistic. Young people get this distorted image of what real life is really like, because no one is telling them that what they see on social media isn't necessarily real life. Whilst social media is very positive, I think adults in power tend to ignore or not understand the negative impacts it has on young people's self-esteem."*  
Izzy, BYC Delegate, 15.

### **Sexting**

13. Our 2014 Survey showed that the vast majority of those aged 11-21 are aware of sexting (85%), with 61% having taken part themselves or knowing others who had. 18% say they have sent such messages, and 30% have received them. 45% say friends have sent/received such messages. Just 24% of those who had heard of sexting didn't know of anyone involved.

The fact that so many young people are taking part in sexting suggests that this may be something that girls feel pressure around. It also suggests that sexting has become a normalised part of many young people's relationships. Therefore, actions taken to reduce the harm it can cause should be in partnership with young people to avoid them being alienated - for example, by attempting to implement unrealistic blanket bans. We believe young people must be listened to and supported to make informed decisions, stay safe and manage pressures through Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) - see summary recommendations.

*"The internet is here and it's here to stay, so censorship simply will not work. We must tackle the real, underlying societal issues which have led to such overt hatred and prejudice online head-on as opposed to candy-coating and covering up the tip of the iceberg."* (Katie, Advocate, 16)

### **Question 5**

#### **Positive uses of the internet**

14. Young people also use the internet in positive and empowering ways - for communication, creativity and activism. 46% of girls aged 13-21 say social media empowers them to speak out about the things they care about. As girls get older, they are more likely to feel confident in freely expressing their views online - 41% aged 17-21 compared to only 27% aged 11-16 (2016).

*"The internet gives young people a voice... gives us access to political discourse, and has made us one of the most connected and worldly generations of all time - and the value of this cannot be overlooked."* (Katie, Advocate, 18)

Campaigns such as 'Be Real' can be an important tool for promoting positive self-image. Girlguiding was proud to support the 'Be Real Pledge', which was created to tackle body image anxiety.



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*“Scrutiny of women’s appearances is crushing girls’ self-confidence. Believing you’re unattractive increases the risk of mental health problems, low aspirations and fear in girls, preventing them from feeling empowered. Be Real’s pledge [was] a fantastic starting point for ending unrealistic body expectations and teaching girls that their looks cannot hold them back from achieving their dreams.” (Emma, Advocate, 18)*

## Question 6

### **Internet providers’ responsibilities**

15. We believe internet providers should take responsibility for the content that is published using their channels and the harmful consequences it can have. For example, Girlguiding has expressed concern about the lack of action taken to date in tackling inappropriate and abusive behaviours such as cyber-bullying, body shaming, and the widespread availability of pornographic material to children under 18.

Along with traditional media outlets, social media providers have a responsibility to better regulate trends which can be damaging to girls’ self-esteem and body confidence, such as widespread gender stereotyping and sexism. For example, in our recent campaign against media sexism, we highlighted and condemned the media focus on female politicians’ appearances. The Advertising Standards Agency (ASA)’s work to look at gender stereotyping in advertising is a good example of a regulator taking responsibility for the harm it can cause.

*“Social Media providers should be taking the lead in tackling everyday sexism. They are in a unique position of being able to reach millions of young people across the world. By taking a zero tolerance approach to sexist comments they would be able to make significant advances to ending the objectification of women and so change the perception of what is acceptable to say online.” (Julia, BYC Delegate, 22)*

*“Social media providers should do more to highlight diverse female bodies to demonstrate to girls and young women that they can be successful and happy no matter what they look like. Furthermore, social media providers should do more to tackle the sexist trolling on social media which often body shames girls and young women.” (Emma, BYC Delegate, 16)*

*“On social media sites, I think there should be options to report sexist comments because if we can report things like racism, why can’t we report sexism, even if it’s mild, if people find it offensive. It will also send the message out to people that saying sexist comments aren’t ok.” (Izzy, BYC Delegate, 15)*

*“I think social media providers could play a role in preventing negative body image ideas circulating by trying to promote positive ideas. However, this may not always be reported as often young women are unaware of the unrealistic and negative content in the first place as society constantly emerges us in it.” (Caitlin, BYC Delegate, 16)*



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### Question 7

#### **The Government's responsibilities**

16. We believe the Government has a role in setting out clear expectations around what is acceptable to all communication providers to ensure the welfare of young people. We also believe Government and regulators should work together to ensure harmful content is restricted so young people are not bombarded with such imagery on a daily basis. Government alongside regulators should ensure the harm caused by social media and other platforms online is tackled. This should take into account the realities of young people's lives. Young people use the internet in many positive ways and banning content judged to be harmful may be disempowering if it includes images/videos of their favourite pop stars or YouTubers. We therefore believe it is essential that work taken forward in this area is done so with the inclusion and meaningful engagement of young people.

It's also important that attempts to discourage the negative effects of social media are not unintentionally disempowering to girls. For example, removing images of women judged as sexualised when the same standard is not applied to images of men could inadvertently teach girls that their bodies are shameful.

*"It's vitally important to all young people that the Government take action to tackle the risks associated with social media. A generation of this country is growing up surrounded by constant objectification of people based on how they identify - whether that be due to their race, gender, sexual orientation or any other characteristic.*

*The Government need to recognise the role of social media in the lives of young people so that future generations are spared the anxiety hurtful comments and images can cause."* (Julia, BYC Delegate, 22)

*"It's important to me that the Government is aware of the negative effects of social media on young women's mental health and how it can lead them to face body anxiety. However I believe that the Government should also be aware of how the Internet can be used to share body positive campaigns and how these can help girls and young women find someone to relate to."* (Emma, BYC Delegate, 16)

*"I think it's incredibly important that the Government are realistic [when addressing harmful online behaviours] because it is an incredibly complex issue and by completely ignoring the positives of social media, such as support and advocacy, then it is not going to be relevant to young people. Also, there needs to be an acknowledgment that the influence of social media on body image anxiety is incredibly widespread. As it's difficult to tackle the issue on the platforms themselves, I think the more positive and impactful action the Government could take would be to provide young people with education about body image to prepare them, which has the capability to reduce the impact of body image anxiety from social media."* (Caitlin, BYC Delegate, 16)



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### Question 9

#### **Body confidence programmes**

17. At Girlguiding, our body confidence programme, *Free Being Me*, can be delivered by Peer Educators or Leaders. It helps girls grow body confidence and self-esteem and challenges unhealthy beauty ideals. The programme encourages girls to challenge social image myths and reframe the ways they think about their bodies so that they are able to articulate positive things about them and value them for more than just how they look.

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGS) did an evaluation of the programme with the University of West England, involving pre and post questionnaires and evaluation of session recordings. This method was suited to the large size of our organisation. Results are due soon.

### Question 10

#### **Body image anxiety and wellbeing**

18. As described throughout this response, we believe body image anxiety contributes to and interacts with a range of pressures - such as anxiety about sexual harassment, online concerns and gender stereotyping - which affect girls' wellbeing.

*"If someone is already living with a mental health condition, the added worry of what to look like, how to dress, if you look pretty enough etc. can be very detrimental to their health. One way in which this could be tackled is through the representation of women in the media. If girls and young women are constantly seeing photo shopped images in magazines or women being judged on how they look online and in print media and politics then they are going to worry about body image even more."* (Julia, 22, BYC Delegate)

One youth panel member spoke about the difficulty in getting support for body image anxiety:

*"In terms of the support available to girls tackling body image challenges, I would say in my experience, initially help was available, but as I went further down the line, it becomes less so. I went to my GP who was very supportive. However, after this, I felt like the help became less accessible."*

*There is online support available now such as through 'silverCloud', which is under the NHS services. However, I would say that face to face help is not adequate for the number of people who are trying to access it. To address this issue, I think that access to services that would support young people with issues they face around body anxiety needs to be increased. People need to be treated before their anxiety develops into something more severe, as this can be life threatening and support is again extremely difficult to access at present."* (BYC Delegate, 19)

### Summary



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19. To address these issues, Girlguiding recommends:

### **Compulsory PSHE**

We were pleased to hear that the Government will make Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) statutory, and are keen to see this happen quickly and effectively. PSHE should support young people to build resilience and learn about body confidence, gender equality, and challenge sexism, narrow beauty ideals and sexual harassment and abuse.

### **Compulsory SRE and addressing sexual harassment in schools**

We are delighted that the Government has made Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) compulsory. We believe SRE is essential to equip young people with the tools to make informed decisions and stay safe. Forthcoming guidance should ensure that this includes sexual consent, online safety, tackling violence against women and girls, and LGBTQ+ and healthy relationships. In addition, Government should place a duty on schools to prevent and tackle sexual harassment and to be held accountable.

*“In my opinion a societal change in attitude is necessary. We need to take these issues to a grassroots level by including them in the new PSHE and SRE curriculums so that the society of tomorrow buys into realistic and diverse branding, and refuses to accept overt sexism and objectification.” (Katie, Advocate, 16)*

### **Better regulation of online and traditional media content**

We welcomed the passage of the Digital Economy Act, which brought in age-verification for online pornography and a code to help social media providers tackle abuse on their platforms. We also believe that Government must have clear expectations for both traditional media outlets and social media providers to better regulate sexism and gender stereotyping where the objectification of women and girls and focus on their appearance contributes to issues around body confidence.

### **Listening to young people**

It's important that efforts to tackle trends leading to body image anxiety involve young people and are realistic about their lives, use of technology and relationships. For example, criticising celebrities or attempting to ban sexting is likely to alienate them.

### **Promoting programmes which address body image anxiety**

Girlguiding's *Free Being Me* helps girls grow body confidence and self-esteem and challenges unhealthy beauty ideals.

For more information please contact Alex Webber, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, [Alex.Webber@girlguiding.org.uk](mailto:Alex.Webber@girlguiding.org.uk)