Digital Economy Bill

Girlguiding Public Bill Committee Evidence October 2016

**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)

**About Girlguiding’s Evidence**

1. Girlguiding’s submission focuses on evidence from our annual Girls’ Attitudes Surveys – the largest survey of girls and young women which gathers the views and opinions of over 1,600 girls and young women throughout the UK aged 7 to 21, from inside and outside guiding. For more information and data in the latest and previous reports please see [www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes](http://www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes).
2. Girlguiding’s response is also influenced by the Girls Matter campaign – Girlguiding’s member-led campaign that profiles girls' and young women's calls for change <http://new.girlguiding.org.uk/report>
3. Our response also includes quotes from members of our Girlguiding Advocate panel - a platform for girls to use their voices and seek change at the highest levels. Our Advocates are a group of 18 Girlguiding members aged 14 to 25 lead the direction of Girlguiding's advocacy and research.

**Overview**

1. Girlguiding welcomes the Digital Economy Bill’s inclusion of provision to introduce age-verification for access to online pornography. Our research with girls and young women tells us that girls are strongly in favour of age-verification for online pornography, and they want access to sexualised adult content online to be restricted. Our research tells us that pornography can have a harmful and negative impact on girls’ and young women’s lives, relationships and aspirations. Below we outline this evidence as well as highlight some areas for further clarity required to ensure its implementation is effective and can achieve the aspirations of protecting and safeguarding children and young people from accessing harmful content, bringing standards and parity of protection for both online and offline content.

**The use of online by young women**

1. Social media is extremely popular for young women and girls. In 2013 our Girls’ Attitudes Survey found that nearly three quarters of girls and young women aged 7 to 21 use at least one of the main social networking sites. Young women and girls are using the internet to have their voices heard take part in conversations in a way that wasn’t possible in the past. Our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey found that 46% of girls aged 13 to 21 agree social media empowers them to speak out about things they care about. Girls and young women also use the internet as a source of information and research, to create social networks and get support, and connect with others.
2. As well as using the internet and online forums in positive ways, girls and young women also tell us about the ways in which being online is not safe for them. This can include online sexual bullying, harassment and abuse, and exposure to inappropriate sexualised content. In our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey we found that 20% of girls aged 13 to 21 have had unwanted pornographic imagery or film sent to them, and for girls as young as 7 to 10, 16% have seen rude images that they found upsetting. A small but significant number of girls aged 13 to 21 have had a sexual photo of them shared without their consent (5%).
3. In 2016 half of girls said sexism is worse online than offline and in our 2014 Survey, 66% of girls aged 11 to 21 said they often or sometimes see or experience sexism online.

**The scale of pornography**

1. In 2015, our Girls’ Attitudes Survey found that 60% of girls aged 11 to 21 see boys their age viewing pornography on mobile phone devises or tablets. By contrast, only 27% of girls said they see girls their age viewing pornography. The majority of girls think that children can access too much content online that should be for adults only (71%).

**The impact of pornography**

*“Porn is objectifying, belittling and creates shame around bodies and sex. To let under 18s view it is not OK.”* (Emma, Girlguiding Advocate)

1. Girls and young women are often acutely aware of online pornography and are unable to choose to avoid it in the background of their day-to-day lives. The majority feel it has a strongly negative effect on their lives, on gender equality and that access to it is damaging young people’s views of sexual relationships. In our 2015 Survey, we found that the majority of girls aged 13 to 21 think online pornography is damaging young people’s views of what sexual relationships are like (73%).

*“It [pornography] creates unrealistic expectations and puts pressure on girls and boys. Porn is too violence and there are genres of porn like rape fantasies that make young boys think this is normal when it isn’t.”* (Girls’ Attitudes Survey respondent, 2015)

1. Our 2015 Survey found that girls aged 17 to 21 say pornography encourages sexist stereotypical and harmful views and that the proliferation of pornography is having a negative effect on women in society more generally:
   1. 70% think the increase in online pornography contributes to women being treated less fairly than men
   2. 87% think online pornography creates unrealistic expectations of what women’s bodies are like (73% said it creates unrealistic expectations of what men’s bodies are like)
   3. 80% think online pornography encourages society to view women as sex objects
   4. 78% think online pornography encourages gender stereotyping of girls/women and boys/men
   5. 71% think online pornography normalises aggressive or violent behaviour towards women
   6. 71% think online pornography gives confusing messages about sexual consent
   7. 66% think online pornography puts pressure on girls to have sex before they are ready
   8. 65% think online pornography increases hateful language used about/to women
2. Girls worry that as an increasing number of young people are left to learn about sex and relationships through online pornography, this is negatively reflected in their lives and relationships. In 2015 our Survey found that 53% of young women aged 17 to 21 think girls are coerced into sex acts because boys are copying what they see in pornography.

*“With the current, substandard state of Sex and Relationships Education, many young people are learning about sex from online porn. Not only does this give them a warped perception of sex, but the dangerous, misogynistic portrayal of sex in pornography feeds into problems of sexual harassment and abuse. It is essential that young people are protected from viewing inappropriate content, which although widespread and easily accessible, is scary, particularly for girls and young women, to see during their most formative years.”* (Katie, Girlguiding Advocate)

*“Boys are expecting sexual relationships to be like in pornographic films. They “learn” from them and think girls would want to be treated how they are in them type of films.”* (Girls’ Attitudes Survey respondent, 2015)

*“We need tighter controls on access to internet porn, changes in advertising and the media to stop sexualising women, and more about consent covered from a younger age.”* (Girls’ Attitudes Survey respondent, 2015).

1. The majority of girls and young women tell us that stereotypical and sexist representations of girls and women online, negatively affects how women are treated in society. In 2016 our Girls’ Attitudes Survey found that 68% of girls aged 13 to 31 think online pornography is influencing how women are portrayed in the media (49% thought pornography influences how men are portrayed). More broadly, 75% of girls’ aged 11 to 21 think women are too often shown as sex objects in the media and online, which made the majority feel disempowered (61%).

*“We don’t want to be objectified. It has a negative impact not only on women but also on men and young boys, and changing this could lead to a decrease in gender-based violence and rape.”* (Haley, Carrickfergus, former Girlguiding Advocate)

1. Alongside research by NSPCC and Fixers, our research published in September 2016 based on focus groups with young women highlighted that the pressures girls are under including sexual pressures linked to pornography as well as exposure to adult sexualised material can have a negative impact on their wellbeing and mental health.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Ensuring effective safeguarding around pornography**

1. Girlguiding supports the Digital Economy Bill’s proposals to implement age-verification for online pornographic websites. We agree this would go some way in reducing young people’s access and exposure to pornography and the harm it can cause. Girlguiding believes age-verification should apply to all providers, including websites and apps, and that search engines also have a role in ensuring children are not exposed to pornographic content. We would hope the regulator is properly resourced to enforce new legislation and its functions via payment providers or auxiliary services, and where non-compliance occurs, the regulator has powers to directly notify and fine all sites, and apply for blocking and/or closing of offending sites. This should apply to all sites available in the UK (but which may not be based in the UK, including through international collaboration).
2. Girlguiding believes there should be an expectation on all platforms that provide internet services to address violations of their own community standards and that companies should have a responsibility to embed in their cultures, adhere to and take responsibility for how their platforms are used, especially when it comes to misogynistic and sexist content.

*“We need tighter controls on access to internet porn, changes in advertising and the media to stop sexualising women, and more about consent covered from a younger age” (*Girlguiding member responding to 2014 Girls’ Attitudes Survey)

**Support for age-verification**

*"Online pornography has a massively detrimental effect on young people accessing it or seeing it around them from a very young age. With the click of a button children can access material aimed at adults, which is toxic to their attitudes towards sex and healthy relationships. By allowing pornography to be freely accessed we are fostering a culture of passivity towards the very obvious adverse effects it has on our young people's perceptions of what is appropriate and what it not."* (Evelyn, Girlguiding Advocate)

1. In 2016 the overwhelming majority of girls and young women told us they are supportive of age-verification controls for online pornography - 75% of girls aged 13 to 21 think all pornography websites should have age verification controls. Girls are facing widespread harassment, abuse and sexism online, including exposure to violent and misogynistic pornography; and 80% of girls aged 11 to 21 in 2016 say more should be done to tackle sexism and abuse online.
2. Whilst the majority of girls aged 11 to 21 agreed in 2014 that children can access too much content online that should be for adults only (71%), only half agreed that parents should be able to control what their children can view on the internet at home (50%). Fewer than half agree that parental control should extend to what their children can view on their mobile devices (46%). Instead more girls said they thought the government has a role to play in making sure that social media companies should take more responsibility for making sure users are safe (55%).

**Beyond age-verification**

1. Whilst age-verification of online pornographic sites will go towards restricting young people’s access to adult content, this must be alongside comprehensive education for young people as a preventative mechanism to enable all young people to develop the skills to negotiate using online forums and navigate pornography which will continue to be accessible to some young people. Our 2016 Survey found that half of girls aged 7 to 10 want to learn about online safety at school and in 2015, our Survey found that whilst 68% of girls aged 11 to 16 wanted to learn about pornography at school, only 25% had.
2. Quality statutory Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) that is modern and relevant can help teach young people about the benefits and risks of using the internet and how to stay safe online. Girlguiding’s Girls Matter campaign called for the government to introduce statutory and modernised sex and relationships education so that lessons included online safety among a number of topics. Schools are in a unique opportunity to engage with all young people around the use and impact of pornography and provide a space to discuss how this affects young people’s understanding of sex, relationships and consent.
3. The Government should accept the recommendations published by the Women and Equalities Committee’s Inquiry report[[2]](#footnote-2) into sexual harassment in schools and update the Sex and Relationship Education Guidance that has not been modernised since 2000 and fails to reflect the rise of the internet and social media since that time, and the integral part it now plays in children’s lives.

*“By introducing quality, compulsory PSHE, schools can play a key role in educating and supporting children in relation to the internet. It is important that we demonstrate to children that not everything they see online is true, and teach them how to determine how reliable a source is. Easy access to pornography is very dangerous for young people as it creates unrealistic expectations of sex. It is impossible to censor the internet, so instead we need to educate teenagers about sex, porn and what's real and what's not so that they can utilise it confidently and safely.” (*Katie, Girlguiding Advocate)

**Further info**

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1. Girlguiding (2016) ‘Girls’ Well-being Explored: Understanding pressures and resilience’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2016) ‘Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools’. Third Report of Session 2016–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)