



May 2019

Girlguiding's submission for the General Comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment

Introduction

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 Rangers (14-18 years). Registered Charity No 306016. 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

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 1,700 girls and young women throughout the country aged 7 to 21, from inside and outside guiding. For more information and data on the latest and previous reports please see www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes

Our submission also includes quotes from members of our youth panels. Our Advocates are a group of 18 Girlguiding members aged 14 to 25 who lead the direction of Girlguiding's advocacy and research. Our British Youth Council (BYC) delegation has 10 members aged 14 to 25, who work with other BYC delegates to campaign for change and improve young people's lives

We believe we are in a good position to respond to this consultation because of our extensive research with girls and young women, including around their experiences - positive and negative - online. Although we know that this issue affects everyone, as the UK's leading organisation for girls and young women, our submission focuses particularly on this group. In addition, online harassment and abuse can affect girls and women disproportionately, so we believe it's vital to represent their experiences, views and voices on this issue.

Submission

How can children's views and experiences be expressed and taken into account when formulating policies and practices which affect their access to, and use of, digital technologies?



May 2019

At Girlguiding, we believe it's important that the voices of children and young people are considered and taken seriously when formulating policies and practices that will affect them, including the use of digital technologies. We believe this can be done through effective youth participation, including accessible consultations that young people can easily understand and respond to. For example, at Girlguiding we have a national youth panel, Advocate, who we consult with regularly. Sometimes this involves adapting consultation documents to make the language more accessible.

Our 2018 Girls' Attitudes Survey shows that only 36% of girls aged 11-21 have spoken up about an issue they care about, showing that more must be done to encourage girls and young people in general to have their say.

How can discrimination (originating offline or online) be effectively addressed, to ensure all children have their rights realised in a digital world?

Girlguiding believes it's essential that steps are taken to protect children, young people and adults from experiencing harassment and abuse online. Our research tells us that this is an issue that particularly affects girls and young women, many of whom have experienced online discrimination, intimidation and harassment. Although it is less common among younger girls, a significant minority of girls as young as 7 to 10 have experienced abuse and harassment online.

As the digital world is so embedded in children's lives, we believe that discrimination online should be addressed with the same level of commitment to discrimination that occurs offline, and so this general comment should reflect the general comments from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Elimination on Racial Discrimination. We also believe that whilst the quickness and ease of the digital world is great in some ways, it can also amplify the risks and put children in a vulnerable situation. Therefore, the impact of this should be considered to effectively addressing discrimination online.

We believe that online platforms have a responsibility to make their services a safe and respectful area to be online. This should involve actively promoting and enforcing community guidelines, making it easier for everyone to report discrimination and abusive behaviour, and to take these concerns seriously through removing content. We also believe that education is an important way to tackle discrimination. We are pleased to see that the new curriculum for Relationships and Sex education includes a focus on having respectful relationships both online and offline.

We'd also like to note that whilst online pornography itself isn't discrimination, our research shows that online pornography and other sexualised imagery can make girls and young women feel disempowered, can have a negative impact on their body confidence, and contributes to a culture in which women are valued more for their appearance than ability, and in which sexism and harassment are frequently normalised. We are pleased to see that



May 2019

age-verification to access online pornography will come into place in July 2019 in the UK, but the availability of graphic images on social media needs to be considered by those trying to keep children safe.

Our 2018 Girls' Attitudes Survey shows:

- 52% of girls aged 11-21 have heard about the recent sexist abuse of women on social media channels, and 25% said this abuse makes them scared that they could also receive this abuse online just for being a girl
- 47% of girls aged 11-21 have had unkind things being said about them on social media
- 36% of girls aged 11-21 know of girls their age who have experienced homophobic bullying
- 33% of girls aged 11-21 know of girls their age who have experienced racial bullying
- 25% of girls aged 11-21 know of girls their age who have experienced bullying about a disability
- 24% of girls aged 13-21 have had sexist comments made about them online

Our survey also shows the impact that discrimination has on girls aged 11-21 years:

- 34% feel less confident in themselves
- 25% less likely to share information about themselves
- 22% feel less confident meeting new people

Our Girls' Attitudes Survey highlights the inappropriate content girls have been exposed to and what impact this has. In 2017:

- 54% of girls aged 11-21 said they have come across unwanted violent or graphic images online that made them feel upset or disturbed
- 26% of girls aged 13 to 21 said they have come across pornography accidentally
- 50% aged 7 -10 are worried about seeing rude pictures online
- 44% aged 11-21 have seen statements about women or girls that they thought were sexist on the news or social media in the past week and 47% had seen stereotypical images of men and women that made them feel less confident to do what they want
- 65% see or hear gender stereotypes on social media often

"A lot of the time social media can be lazy when responding to concerns. This is evidenced through countless occasions where I have come across racist, misogynistic and offensive attacks where the perpetrator's comments were not a one-time thing. I think social media doesn't take these hate remarks as seriously as they should, as I know of people that have reported others and the most that was done was that the account was temporarily suspended, but not permanently, and further checks were not undertaken." (Girlguiding Advocate, 14-25)

How should the General Comment treat the role of parents and other caregivers?



May 2019

Our 2017 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed that only 47% of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 think their parents understand the pressures they face online. We believe it's important that parents and caregivers are given the information they need so that children and young people's rights can be realised in the digital world and they should also be supported to understand the issues their children experience online and to put the right actions in place to keep their children safe.

This information should also cover how to avoid inadvertently putting children at risk - for example, by sharing photos or locations publicly. It should also include the importance of asking children's permission before sharing images of them. Our 2017 Girls' Attitudes Survey shows that 22% of girls aged 7 to 10 said their parents post pictures of them on social media without asking for permission first and 21% said they feel embarrassed when their parents post pictures of them on social media.

"I think parents need to show their children how to make their social media accounts private, as this would prevent a lot of issues arising. [Parents] should ask children when sharing photos of them online because children are entitled to privacy. A photo being posted without permission could make the child uncomfortable and carries the risk of these getting into the wrong hands, especially if photos include personal information e.g. school name affecting children's safety." (Laura, Advocate, 16)

"I think parents should know what social media their child uses to make sure they are comfortable with the sites. However, teenagers should be given the freedom to use social media, as it comes with many benefits such as keeping in contact or sharing memories. Raising awareness about risks is important for both parents and children to understand how to stay safe online." (Imogen, Advocate, 15)

How should the practices of businesses operating in the digital environment support the realisation of children's rights?

We believe that businesses operating in the digital environment should adhere to the age-appropriate design code, making sure to develop their services with the best interests of the child in mind. We believe that online platforms should take responsibility for the content that appears on their platforms. This involves making it easier for users to report abusive or harmful content and making it easier for users to block others. Businesses should also actively respond to the concerns of their users and remove the abusive or harmful content and users that are reported. Another way business can support the realisation of children's rights in the digital environment is through providing clearer terms, conditions and community guidelines using accessible language that children and young people can understand.

Our 2018 Girls' Attitudes Survey shows what girls aged 11-21 are most likely to do when someone is being offensive online:



May 2019

- 50% would tell their parents
- 42% would delete the post or unfriend the person
- 41% would report it to the social media site
- 23% would ignore it

“I think it’s incredibly rare for girls to report abuse and harassment, likely because they fear judgement or being told that ‘it happens’. This leads girls to feel as though their harassment is not worth anyone’s time, but this needs to end. Spreading awareness of harassment and educating people to know that it should be reported would be a big step forward for reporting abuse to be more supported.” (Imogen, Advocate, 15)

“Girls can face groomers online who make fake accounts to try and lure them into sending inappropriate photos or to meet them. I think social media sites are responsible for stopping this. They could do this by adding a symbol on someone’s profile when they have been verified to show they are who they say. Then, if an unverified account contacts a girl, she would be aware that it has the potential to be a fake account, and to be wary of a potential groomer.” (Laura, Advocate, 16)

How can States better realise their obligations to children's rights in relation to the digital environment?

We believe that States can better realise their obligations to children’s rights in relation to the digital environment through actively listening to children and finding meaningful ways to engage with them. We also believe it’s important for States to actively promote these rights to children in an age-appropriate and accessible way, making sure it’s easily visible, able to reach and engage them, and uses simple language. We also think it’s important to recognise that the online world is global, and content can be accessed across borders. Therefore, all States should do their best to meet their responsibilities and work together realise their obligations.

Is the realisation of children’s rights in the digital environment necessary to realise children’s rights in other environments?

We believe that the realisation of children’s rights in relation to the digital environment is necessary to realise children’s rights in other environments. As previously mentioned, the online world is not completely separate from the offline world, and it forms a large part of children’s lives. If children’s rights in the digital environment aren’t realised, then this can have a negative impact on them. We believe that children should be able to explore, learn and play through the digital environment without negative consequences or harm.

We believe it’s important that the positive and empowering ways that young people use the internet - such as for communication, creativity and activism - are not overlooked. Our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey showed that girls can see social media as a space where they can share their views and seek support. 46% of girls aged 13 to 21 said that social media



May 2019

empowers them to speak out about things they care about and 14% aged 11 to 21 told us they had accessed an online support group. It's vital that efforts to tackle online harassment and abuse involve young people and acknowledge the realities of their lives - including positive experiences online.

"All forms of abuse online are increasingly widespread and it seems as though, online, people can intimidate and manipulate others in a way that they would never do in real life." (Young woman, 14-21)

"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)

Our recommendations

1. Businesses operating in the digital environment should have to follow minimum standards and must consider the best interests of the child.
2. Young people should receive high-quality education on how to stay safe online
3. Parents and other caregivers should also receive education about online safety so that they are equipped to keep their children safe online and understand the risks of sharing photos and information about their children.
4. The voices of girls and young women - and all young people - must be included in discussions and decisions on this issue, through direct participation and taking advice from experts in children and young people. This includes finding a way for the voices of children under 18 to be heard in relation to the 'right to forget'.
5. Terms and conditions should be clear and easy to understand so that young people know how to report harassment and abuse. A good example of this is from the Children's Commissioner for England's¹. However, the barriers that stop girls and young women from reporting issues such as the normalisation of sexism and abusive behaviour or the fear of being bullied for speaking out, should also be tackled
6. Social media sites should be responsible for removing adult content from their platforms
7. Other documents should be considered - such as the VAWG Strategy², the Age-appropriate design³, and the Online harms white paper⁴ in the UK. We also recommend considering issues of online harassment and abuse alongside other online pressures, such as the pressure to live the perfect life online, body image anxiety and sexual harassment.

For more information please contact: Leah Widdicombe, Research Officer,
Leah.widdicombe@girlguiding.org.uk

¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2017/09/29/childrens-commissioner-launches-social-media-giants-terms-and-conditions-jargon-buster-to-give-kids-more-power-in-digital-world/>

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/783596/VAWG_Strategy_Refresh_Web_Accessible.pdf

³ <https://ico.org.uk/media/about-the-ico/consultations/2614762/age-appropriate-design-code-for-public-consultation.pdf>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/793360/Online_Harms_White_Paper.pdf