



Minutes of the APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse Meeting **'Children and Young People's Online Safety – How misogynist behaviour is being normalised online?'**

Wednesday 13th December 2023, 14:00-15:30

Hybrid Meeting

Chair: Rt Hon Sir Robert Buckland KC MP

Given that online misogyny and VAWG are so widespread, the APPG welcomed the Royal Assent of the Online Safety Act, which requires Ofcom to produce guidance that summarises measures that can be taken to reduce the risk of harm to women and girls.

The APPG met to discuss how to ensure this legislation and guidance truly makes a difference for children and young people, and how we can hold online platforms accountable for preventing and tackling VAWG. The meeting also examined the role of Relationship, Health and Sex Education (RSHE) in addressing online misogyny and VAWG, which is particularly pertinent given the current review of RSHE statutory guidance.

The meeting was chaired by Rt Hon Sir Robert Buckland KC MP with Rt Hon Liz Saville Roberts MP in attendance.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Buckland KC MP

Sir Robert welcomed the attendees and speakers and thanked them for their time. He provided a brief explanation of the Online Safety Act and Ofcom guidance, noting the importance of ensuring that the legislation meaningfully improves the online safety of children and young people and addresses online misogyny and VAWG. While the APPG had invited David Johnston MP, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing, to speak, he was unfortunately unable to attend. Sir Robert also acknowledged that the panel did not include anyone from a Black and/or minoritised background, despite the APPG's best efforts to ensure the panel was as diverse as possible. This partly speaks to the lack of diversity in the tech sector but is regretful given the additional risks that Black and minoritised women and children face online.

Alison Hadley, Chair, Sex Education Forum

Alison introduced the Sex Education Forum, a group of 75 partners working together to achieve quality relationships and sex education (RSE) that supports the physical and mental health of children and young people. The organisation works by convening

stakeholders involved in RSE, supporting educators and parents to provide quality RSE and gathering evidence on RSE. The Sex Education Forum's work is underpinned by evidence, a rights-based approach and the needs of children and young people.

Alison remarked that the introduction of mandatory RSHE in 2017 was to be celebrated and that regular reviews of the guidance to ensure it remains up to date are welcome. However, the politicisation of the current review and the misleading reporting on the current content of RSE is disappointing, as it detracts from the needs expressed by children and young people themselves.

Lucy Emmerson, CEO, Sex Education Forum

Lucy added that as well as the many developments since mandatory RSHE and its guidance was introduced, such as the Royal Assent of the Online Safety Act, the global Covid pandemic also occurred. This not only had significant impacts on children and young people, but also slowed down the implementation of statutory RSHE. Despite this, strong trends have emerged showing the positive impact of mandatory RSHE, with Ofsted commenting that many schools have now adjusted their timetable to give RSHE proper space as a subject on the curriculum.

Due to the increased relevance of online harms in RSE, Lucy agreed that it was important that RSE supports children and young people to think critically about what they consume on social media.

She noted that navigating RSE in this regard requires us to think about how children and young people are interacting with online environments. For example, when considering what age the topic of social media should be taught in schools, one could say that it should begin at age 13, which is when apps allow children and young people to join. However, this would not be reflective of when a child first encounters social media, which is usually before the age of 13.

To demonstrate a positive example of RSE, Lucy shared a case study on a primary school in the Brighton and Hove area. Upper KS2 pupils (aged 9 and 10) at the school were using the phrase 'do ya', which they had heard on social media. Whilst the pupils were using the phrase to mean 'go away' or 'leave it', it was an abbreviation of 'doin ya mum'. To address this, the school held discussions led by specialist teachers with staff, classrooms and in assemblies.

These discussions revealed that the pupils had a lack of understanding of what they had heard online, and they were disgusted and upset when the true meaning was explained to them. The pupils recognised that the phrase was offensive to girls and women and the discussion expanded to include other sexist and misogynist ideas promoted by social media influencers.

Building on this scenario, the PSHE staff at the school then developed a series of RSE lesson materials on gender, challenging stereotypes and critical thinking. This school's response is an effective example of good RSE, which was coordinated using a whole school approach. Moreover, it left the pupils equipped with the skills they needed to appropriately navigate not only that instance but social media more generally.

Alison Hadley, Trustee, Sex Education Forum

Discussing what Sex Education Forum is calling for in regard to the review, Alison said that it needs to build on the existing RSHE guidance, which is comprehensive but has not yet been fully implemented. The guidance needs to provide more advice on sequencing the curriculum and ensure that children and young people learn critical thinking skills, communication skills and about the principles of consent from an early age. This will help RSE play a protective role by preparing children and young people for what they may encounter online.

Furthermore, pupils as well as parents need to be consulted on the guidance and the Government needs to have consideration of their views and experiences to ensure that RSHE is fit for purpose. Much of the review has focused on age ratings, which neglects the reality of children and young people's experience, such as 1 in 10 children aged 9 having accessed pornography.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Buckland KC MP

Sir Robert thanked Lucy and Alison for their contribution and invited Katherine Dean to speak.

Katherine Dean, Senior Research Policy Officer, Women's Aid

Katherine shared that she would be discussing [Women's Aid's latest research](#) into the attitudes of children and young people towards domestic abuse and what influences these. Women's Aid have been exploring attitudes to domestic abuse with a view that this can help us better understand where and why domestic abuse is tolerated in our society so that it may be addressed.

In regard to the report methodology, Women's Aid worked with polling agency ORB to reach a nationally representative sample of two groups, one aged 7-18, and the other aged 18-25, with a survey for each group. The survey questions aimed to understand children and young people's perceptions of, and attitudes towards, relationships, as well as the belief systems that underpin these. The questions also aimed to understand what influences these belief systems and what changes them.

In terms of the research findings on attitudes, Katherine outlined that whilst the majority of children (7-18) surveyed could distinguish between healthy and unhealthy behaviours in relationships, a significant minority held attitudes that normalise

unhealthy relationships. Furthermore, they couldn't identify examples of coercive and controlling behaviour, which underpin domestic abuse. A fifth (22%) of children and young people believed there should be one more dominant person in a relationship. These findings were similar, and sometimes increased, across the older age group sampled (18-25). The research also found some gender differences in the older age group, with men significantly more likely to agree with harmful attitudinal statements compared with women. Such findings clearly show RSE resources need to engage young men and boys in particular.

Having ascertained an understanding of children and young people's attitudes, the research then considered what had influenced these attitudes. Social media was a particular focus as most young people reported seeing a range of 'influencing' online social media content.

Concerningly, the research found that children and young people who had been exposed to misogynistic views on social media, such as Andrew Tate content, had significantly more harmful perceptions of relationships and greater tolerance of doing harm. Whilst it was noted that the research can't determine causation, there are clearly significant links between exposure to misogynistic content and harmful perceptions of relationships. Almost a fifth (19%) who had seen misogynistic content thought 'hurting someone physically is okay if you say sorry after hurting them' compared with just 4% of those not exposed.

Katherine also noted some of the research findings around the influence of exposure to nudity or pornography on social media, which showed that those exposed were more likely to agree with some of the unhealthy perceptions around relationships. As an example, 28% of young people exposed to nudity/pornography agreed with the statement 'someone you are going out with will break up with you if you don't kiss them when they want you to', compared with just 8% amongst those who had not been exposed. Without effective education on sex and sexual relationships, there is a risk that young people will 'learn' dynamics from the nudity/pornography that they see online and believe it is an accurate representation of sex.

Katherine concluded her remarks by sharing some of the report's recommendations which include working with VAWG sector experts on the review of RSHE guidance and designing the curriculum with recognition of how relationships intersect with gender roles and wider intersectional inequality. Content that promotes healthy attitudes can also be effective in countering misogynistic narratives online and must be utilised for this purpose. The report echoed Lucy and Alison's calls for RSE to empower children and young people to think critically about the content they see online.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Buckland KC MP

Sir Robert thanked Katherine and welcomed Dr Julia Slupska to share her contribution.

Dr Julia Slupska, Head of Policy, Research and Campaigns, Glitch

Dr Julia echoed Sir Robert's remarks at the beginning of the session by noting that she is a white woman speaking on an issue that disproportionately affects Black and minoritised women. She noted that the work to address such issues should not fall on the shoulders of those who are disproportionately impacted.

Glitch is a charity working to end online abuse, with a particular focus on Black women and marginalised people. Earlier in the year, Glitch published their report on [Digital Misogynoir](#). Misogynoir is a term coined by Dr Moya Bailey, which refers to the particular harms directed at Black women who are uniquely discriminated against because of their gender and race.

In order to explore the prevalence of digital misogynoir, which the report was the first to do, Glitch analysed almost one million social media posts across five social media platforms. Worryingly, one in five posts about women analysed contained a high degree of toxicity, including misogyny, racism, and other forms of dehumanisation. In particular, the dataset contained incredibly harmful ideas of Black women including fetishisation and sexualisation, which is used to justify violence against Black women, the angry Black women trope, which is often employed to silence Black women, as well as other harmful messaging such as body shaming and fatphobia.

Julia remarked that even as a small charity, Glitch was able to find a plethora of these examples, which shows that technology companies prioritise profits and rapid expansion over basic safety measures.

To tackle online harms, Glitch influences legislation and policy, such as by [campaigning](#) for women and girls to be included in the Online Safety Act. Glitch also works with tech companies, organisations and individuals to deliver workshops on digital self-care and online bystander interventions. Workshops which would be useful in schools and should be considered in the RSHE review.

Julia also highlighted that having to focus on reducing harm takes away from the effort that could be used to create joyful spaces online, such as the positive digital communities that Black women have created. It was also noted that young people are stewards of technology and are more than capable of calling out abuse online, which they must be supported to do. Lastly, creators and individuals must be empowered to amplify positive messages on social media that call out online harms.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Buckland KC MP

Sir Robert thanked Dr Julia for her contribution and welcomed Baroness Beeban Kidron to share her contribution.

Baroness Beeban Kidron, Founder and Chair, 5 Rights Foundation

Baroness Kidron began her remarks by paying tribute to all the attendees and everyone in the VAWG sector, saying that VAWG sector professionals must be assured that their voice matters. In reference to the [campaign](#) which Dr Julia noted on the Online Safety Bill, Baroness Kidron shared her perspective from the receiving end of the campaign, saying that it was truly powerful and made a tangible difference.

Baroness Kidron welcomed the introduction of the Ofcom guidance on women and girls to the Bill and said that it caused her to think of all those who aren't represented and don't have a seat at the table. She shared that the expansion of the digital world felt regressive, which encouraged her to dedicate her work to ensuring that children and young people can thrive online.

Baroness Kidron explained that the current eco-system of online content is not a mistake but is rather designed to be the way that it is. Algorithms create norms and a snowball effect, which is by design and is particularly concerning when it comes to harmful content. While platforms don't design for hateful content to be widespread, they are not doing enough to address the hate that is the result of their design.

This is cause for hope as something that is 100% designed or engineered can be changed. Young women don't want to speak out online because of the hate they will receive, yet it is so important that all voices are represented online to ensure that we can bring about the change we need.

Baroness Kidron emphasised the need to recognise that the online world manifests in the hearts and minds of children, as Women's Aid research shared by Katherine highlighted. The adoption of such harmful attitudes by young boys is not only a harm to girls and women, but also boys themselves.

Ofcom's guidance is only scheduled to be published in 2025, which presents a good opportunity for us to develop a strong, collective call for what we want to be included in the guidance. Baroness Kidron called on everyone in attendance to ensure that we present a strong message to Ofcom's consultation, that is grounded in a view that rights online are the minimum that must be maintained. Ultimately children and young people have a right to participate in a digital world in which they flourish.

Baroness Kidron also highlighted the need to bring conversations on online VAWG and children and young people's online safety to other areas of policy and legislation

including Ofcom's current consultation on media literacy and the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, which is in progress in Parliament.

Discussion

- Sex Education Forum was asked how we can ensure teachers feel educated and empowered to deliver effective RSHE. Lucy highlighted that some teachers have educated themselves, some try replicate good RSHE that they received, and a few have received good training. However, she noted that the Government has only spent half of their allocated budget on teacher training and as a result the quality of RSHE across the country is inconsistent. Training, which is not expensive, must be continuous so that it remains up to date. Lucy said that while teacher training is not a part of the review, it should be.
- The Sex Education Forum was also asked whether there has been any research into the benefits of using external providers for RSE/RSHE teaching, rather than the teachers who are part of the pupils' everyday school life. Alison said that while external educators can be beneficial, especially when it comes to specialist issues, they should not be relied upon by schools to deliver RSHE. Lucy added that schools with poor RSE training tend to rely on external providers rather than embedding RSE via a whole school approach.
- A related question was asked on whether training on RSHE will be made mandatory across every sector, as well as in schools. Sir Robert said he was not aware of any plans for this. Dr Julia said that while she couldn't say for sure whether or not this training should be mandatory, everyone must feel empowered to speak out about these issues. This is especially important in certain sectors, for example, Glitch is looking to work with political parties ahead of the general election to combat online harm, which Black and minoritised female candidates disproportionately face. Katherine added that Women's Aid's research highlighted the need for RSHE to go beyond schools and for parents and communities to be empowered to tackle these issues. Lucy added that foster carers require some form of RSHE training to support children in care, a priority that Sex Education Forum is addressing.
- Glitch was asked how those who work in the technology sector and in the wider women's sector can support Glitch's work as a small charity. In response, Julia noted the importance of relying on VAWG experts. For example, the technology sector needs to implement risk assessments to reduce harm and should rely on VAWG experts and others to inform their work. She added that charities often work directly with survivors and are therefore more in tune with their needs.
- A question was put to the panel on the issue of ensuring that RSE is effective for LGBTQ+ pupils. Katherine highlighted the importance of relying on 'by and for' experts and added that Women's Aid's research found that Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual respondents felt that RSHE did not reflect their experience, stating that this needs to be addressed.

- The panel was asked how we can effectively hold tech companies to account when they are based in the USA. Sir Robert noted that the Online Safety Act and Digital Bill are world leading in terms of online legislation. Baroness Kidron also noted the importance of legislation. Dr Julia added to that, sharing that there is real issue on regulation of digital spaces in the USA, and that they are looking to the EU and the UK for guidance on how it can be done effectively. This speaks to the importance of Ofcom's guidance on women and girls.
- Alison noted the Department for Education's upcoming consultation on the RSHE guidance, and called on everyone to ensure that they respond to it. She said the Sex Education Forum would be willing to share a draft response that people can incorporate in their submission.
- The Group also discussed Ofcom's upcoming consultation on their guidance on women and girls, with Sir Robert and Baroness Kidron suggesting that we the APPG could collaborate with the APPG on Digital Regulation to develop a response.

Sir Robert concluded the session, saying that the APPG would take away these actions. He thanked all the speakers and attendees and noted that details of the APPG's next meeting would be sent in the new year.

Actions:

- Sex Education Forum to share their response to the RSHE Review with the Secretariat who will distribute among this group.
- APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse to collaborate with the APPG on Digital Regulation to develop a joint response to Ofcom's upcoming consultation.

Research referred to in the meeting:

- Women's Aid: [Influencers and attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?](#)
- Glitch: [The Digital Misogynoir Report](#)
- Sex Education Forum: [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#)