



# Consultation response form

## Your response

Question	Your response
<p><b>Question 1:</b> Do you have any comments on our proposed approach to 'content and activity' which 'disproportionately affects women and girls'?</p>	<p>Confidential? – N</p> <p>As noted in the consultation documentation, women and girls are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse. However, limited attention has been given to the following. Providers of regulated user-to user services and search services are contributing to ways that domestic abuse perpetrators can incorporate technology to engage in coercive control of victims. Guidance needs to ensure that platforms and search providers are aware of how domestic abuse perpetrators are using their services and enact measures to disrupt them.</p> <p>In research conducted for the Home Office with colleagues at the University of Portsmouth and the University of Kent <a href="https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/files/50080933/Home_office_FINAL_report.pdf">https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/files/50080933/Home_office_FINAL_report.pdf</a> <a href="#">Sugiura, L., Button, M., Nurse, J. R., Tapley, J., Saglam, R. B., Hawkins, C., ... &amp; Blackbourn, D. (2024). The technification of domestic abuse: Methods, tools and criminal justice responses. Criminology &amp; Criminal Justice, 17488958241266760.</a></p> <p>We found that perpetrators were able to use social media to monitor, control, threaten and intimidate victims via the creation of fake accounts.</p> <p>In these contexts, fake accounts are created based on a fictitious person, real persons known to the victim (e.g., friends) or impersonate the victim themselves. Perpetrators can create fake accounts and impersonate others without any legal recourse currently available to stop or punish them. Therefore, platforms have no responsibility to respond and close and ban repeat offenders, and even if they do, there is nothing to stop new accounts from being created or abusers from masking their address and identity.</p>

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	<p>It is also essential to understand the online content that is not only readily available to perpetrators and would-be perpetrators but also encourages and normalises abusive behaviours, which is mostly targeted towards women and girls.</p> <p>Whilst the potential harms associated with algorithms, recommenders and predictive searches are recognised, they are not technically illegal, and promoted products are revenue-generating. Although service providers will have to assess risks and implement measures to reduce the risk of their platforms enabling illegal harm, where there is a greyer area, especially those relating to income, opportunities to prevent the facilitation of abuse may have less engagement.</p> <p>Meanwhile, guidance on how to misuse technological tools for abuse can be found online through simple search queries. Recommendations complete sentences about 'how to stalk/ how to hack into your partner's devices.' Preventing algorithms from returning these results and effectively validating abusive behaviours should be an 'easy win' for search services.</p> <p>Online options provided to would-be perpetrators enable individuals to find, source and apply technologies to harm others in their domestic environment. These apps are marketed and advertised to individuals seeking to abuse or control their victims through technology.</p> <p>The accessibility of devices used for monitoring the physical identity of individuals, such as covert cameras, microphones and GPS trackers, through online retailers is indeed concerning. Popular platforms provide a wide range of options for individuals seeking these devices. Often, adverts for these items will say things like "use this to check up on your cheating wife". For more details on this please see <a href="https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958241266760">https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17488958241266760</a></p> <p>Furthermore, the ability to hide these devices in various forms raises additional concerns. For example, devices disguised as toys or other innocuous objects can be particularly troubling, as they may be used to exploit</p>

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	<p>children or manipulate partners through the involvement of children.</p> <p>Efforts should be made to ensure that online marketplaces have appropriate policies and safeguards in place to prevent the misuse of these technologies and protect potential victims from harm. Online marketplaces should proactively address the ethical implications of selling technologies commonly misused in the context of domestic abuse.</p> <p>This involves integrating those issues into their ethical strategy agendas and clearly defining their values and ethical strategies during the development of their search engines. Their search engines could significantly contribute to protecting victims by refraining from prioritising the display of items with user reviews indicating their association with domestic abuse.</p> <p>Furthermore, incorporating legal warnings about the potential consequences of misusing these items would further promote responsible purchasing behaviour and help mitigate potential harm. In addition, raising public awareness about the potential risks and signs of online domestic abuse (emphasising the coercive and controlling aspects of this) can help individuals identify and respond to such situations effectively.</p> <p>We also need to consider the current ineffectiveness of content moderation on mainstream platforms and how algorithms can be tamed to stop recommending harmful misogynistic content.</p> <p>In research on misogynistic groups online such as incels <a href="#">Sugiura, L. (2021). <i>The incel rebellion: The rise of the manosphere and the virtual war against women.</i> Emerald Publishing Limited, Solea, A. I., &amp; Sugiura, L. (2023). Mainstreaming the blackpill: Understanding the incel community on TikTok. <i>European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research</i>, 29(3), 311-336.</a> accounts that contain content on misogynistic ideologies can circumvent measures on mainstream platforms such as TikTok, which are designed to block misogynist and hateful content. They use creative language to circumvent regulations, such as changing letters to</p>

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	<p>symbols or referring to terms that are not recognised by platforms as misogynistic.</p> <p>There is a lack of understanding as to how seemingly innocuous terms are linked with misogynist groups, influencers, and ideologies. Other ways of circumventing censorship include text and images blurred to avoid content removal, often this involves offensive posts, usually copied from more clandestine sites such as 4Chan and Reddit.</p> <p>Users claim that they're not misogynistic; rather, they are educating men on biology and facts. Some videos even have disclaimers that they are for educational purposes to avoid shadow banning and can reach wider audiences. Others post links to private Discord servers where more extreme and discriminatory content may be.</p>
<p><b>Question 2:</b> Do you have any comments on the nine proposed actions? Please provide evidence to support your answer.</p>	<p>Confidential? – N</p> <p>We have responded to action points 1,2,7,8,9</p> <p><b>Taking responsibility</b></p> <p>1. Ensure that governance and accountability processes address online gender- based harm, for example by consulting subject matter experts and setting policies that prohibit these harms.</p> <p>When consulting with subject matter experts, particularly from academia, it is essential to consider individuals' approach to working in the VAWG arena. E.g., methodologically, researchers studying misogynist groups have the responsibility to approach their work reflexively, particularly when they share characteristics with the individuals they study (Berger 2015). Knowledge produced by the dominant class is limited in its ability to recognise and interrogate power structures (Hartsock 1983).</p> <p>Those on the margins are better positioned to interrogate social relations because they have experiential knowledge of structural disadvantage and often see privilege where members of the dominant class might not (Collins 1986; Hekman 1997).</p> <p>The overwhelming representation of dominant group members in academia means that limitations relating to conceptualisation, methodological rigour, and biases are</p>

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	<p>common and that more liberatory standpoints (e.g., from trans and non-binary people or women of colour) are ignored. For further consideration of this concerning research on male supremacism and misogynist incels specifically, please see <a href="#">Kelly, M., Rothermel, A. K., &amp; Sugiura, L. (2024). Victim, Violent, Vulnerable. Perspectives on Terrorism, 18(1), 91-119.</a></p> <p>A feminist structural perspective on gender can help researchers to recognise that they too are firmly fixed in male supremacist structures and culture, and so must purposefully work to avoid reproducing them. For heterosexual cisgender men, their particular subjectivity may make it easier to overlook forms of online misogyny <a href="#">Andersen, J. C., &amp; Sugiura, L. (2024). Interacting with online deviant subcultures: Gendered experiences of interviewing incels. In The Routledge international handbook of online deviance (pp. 537-553). Routledge.</a> Intentionally drawing on feminist perspectives, like feminist standpoint theory that encourages researchers to recognise how their positionality shapes their research, can prevent this problem.</p> <p>References:</p> <p>Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. <i>Qualitative research</i>, 15(2), 219-234.</p> <p>Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. <i>Social problems</i>, 33(6), s14-s32.</p> <p>Hartsock, N. C. (1983). Money, sex, and power: Toward a feminist historical materialism.</p> <p>Hekman, S. (1997). Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited. <i>Signs: Journal of women in culture and society</i>, 22(2), 341-365.</p> <p>2. Conduct risk assessments that focus on harms to women and girls, for example by engaging with survivors and victims and conducting user surveys.</p>

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	<p>While Ofcom has provided a risk assessment framework, it remains the responsibility of service providers to consider how this framework might be interpreted through the lens of their organisation's internal culture, an aspect that could introduce bias into decision-making processes. For example, existing research (Mayer et al, 2021; Rosbach et al., 2024) has demonstrated that risk assessments can be undermined by heuristic and cognitive biases, leading to inaccurate or inconsistent evaluations. However, the literature also provides valuable insights into strategies for mitigating such biases in practice (Mayer et al., 2021; Rosbach et al., 2024).</p> <p>Therefore, service providers must ensure staff receive regular training and critically reflect on how decisions are formed over time. Furthermore, where artificial intelligence (AI) is incorporated into risk assessment processes, it must be acknowledged that these systems, designed and trained by humans, may replicate, or even amplify existing biases. For instance, AI tools can reinforce biases related to race, gender, sexuality, and age (Bartoletti &amp; Xenidis, 2023). Service providers should carefully consider the broader ethical and operational implications of using AI, particularly when it is relied upon either wholly or in part to make determinations about illegal content.</p> <p>References</p> <p>Bartoletti, I., &amp; Xenidis, R. (2023). <i>Study on the impact of artificial intelligence systems, their potential for promoting equality, including gender equality, and the risks they may cause in relation to non-discrimination</i>. Council of Europe. <a href="https://rm.coe.int/study-on-the-impact-of-artificial-intelligence-systems-their-potential/1680ac99e3">https://rm.coe.int/study-on-the-impact-of-artificial-intelligence-systems-their-potential/1680ac99e3</a></p> <p>Mayer, S., Shah, R., &amp; Kalil, A. (2021). How cognitive biases can undermine program scale-up decisions. In <i>The Scale-Up Effect in Early Childhood and Public Policy</i> (pp. 41-57). Routled</p> <p>Rosbach, E., Ammeling, J., Krügel, S., Kießig, A., Fritz, A., Ganz, J., ... &amp; Aubreville, M. (2024). When Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right"--Examining Confirmation Bias and the Role of Time Pressure During Human-AI</p>

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	<p>Collaboration in Computational Pathology. <i>arXiv preprint arXiv:2411.01007</i>.</p> <p><b>Supporting women and girls</b></p> <p>7. Give users better control over their experiences, for example by providing the option to block multiple accounts at once.</p> <p>In making platforms safer for women and girls, this should include making reporting systems easier to use. We know many companies sometimes say that reported content does not breach their community standards, even when it is clearly abusive, harassing or intimidating <a href="#">Solea, A. I., &amp; Sugiura, L. (2023). Mainstreaming the blackpill: Understanding the incel community on TikTok. <i>European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research</i>, 29(3), 311-336.</a> Muting and blocking abuse functions puts the onus of responsibility on victims. Measures often rely on victims to go into settings and understand how features work. There is an assumption of a level playing field when it comes to tech ability, but what about non-English speakers, for example.</p> <p>8. Enable users who experience online gender-based harm to make reports, for example by building reporting systems designed in a way that is supportive and accessible for those experiencing domestic abuse.</p> <p>Whilst Ofcom defines illegal content based on existing criminal offences, the judgements made by platforms do not formally recognise individuals as victims of crime. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that many individuals who report such content are, in fact, potential victims regardless of whether they identify as such or are perceived by the platform as victims, or merely as users reporting potentially illegal content. Service providers must therefore recognise that, for some victims, the act of reporting may represent a coping response or help-seeking behaviour. Within the broader context of recovery, reporting can serve as a means for victims to regain a sense of control, pursue justice, and seek resolution for the harm they have experienced. Moreover, the initial response that victims and survivors receive when reporting an offence is critical, as it shapes their willingness to engage further</p>

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	<p>with the process and influences the likelihood of them reporting again in the future (<a href="#">Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025</a>).</p> <p>As such, it is crucial to consider the expectations of users when making a report. Some may assume that submitting a report will directly result in the perpetrator's behaviour stopping or that it will lead to police action. Therefore, providers must be transparent with women and girls not only about what actions can be taken when a report is filed, but also about the limitations of their powers. For instance, if a user-to-user (U2U) service provider is not obligated to report illegal content, except in cases involving child sexual exploitation, it is essential that users are clearly informed about what actions, if any, will be taken when priority or illegal content is reported. Additionally, users should be provided with details of relevant organisations they can contact, including the police and specialist support services, should they choose to do so.</p> <p>While intersectionality and accessibility are acknowledged in the report, further attention must be paid to the specific needs of different user groups, an area that is not explored in sufficient depth within the current guidance. For example, the guidance should be more direct in asking service providers to consider the experiences of women and girls who are also neurodivergent, such as those who are autistic or adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, or dyscalculia. For example, evidence suggests that autistic individuals face an increased risk of experiencing various forms of victimisation compared to non-autistic individuals (Trundle et al., 2022). They are also more likely to experience multiple forms of victimisation across their life course (Trundle et al., 2023) and have a heightened risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rumball et al., 2020). Additionally, some neurodivergent individuals may encounter unique barriers when reporting, such as difficulty recognising certain behaviours as abusive or misinterpreting harmful intentions (Sedgewick &amp; Douglas, 2023).</p> <p>Differences in communication styles and needs may also contribute to challenges when engaging with reporting or support services. As a result, some neurodivergent people, including autistic individuals, may face additional</p>

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	<p>obstacles when reporting illegal content. For instance, research has found that autistic people are not taken seriously, or they fear they might not be believed (Gibbs &amp; Pellicano, 2023). They may also have difficulty recalling information about specific past events (Crane &amp; Maras, 2018) or feel overwhelmed by sensory stimuli in stressful situations. Furthermore, they may have different expectations about what service providers can do, particularly if this is not communicated clearly and in accessible formats.</p> <p>It is therefore essential that stakeholders, including individuals from these communities, are meaningfully consulted in the development of tools and policies. This includes considering the specific harms experienced by neurodivergent women and girls and ensuring inclusivity in tools such as risk assessments and reporting systems. Service providers should also adopt a similar approach when designing systems intended to warn potential perpetrators who are neurodivergent about their behaviour. In conclusion, the guidance should be more specific when addressing groups who may be more vulnerable to harm. It must require service providers to take meaningful and appropriate steps to ensure inclusive, accessible, and equitable practices.</p> <p>References</p> <p>Crane, L., &amp; Maras, K. (2018). General memory abilities for autobiographical events in adults with autism spectrum disorder. <i>The Wiley handbook of memory, autism spectrum disorder, and the law</i>, 146-178.</p> <p>Domestic Abuse Commissioner. (2025). <i>Shifting the scales: Transforming the criminal justice response to domestic abuse</i>.  <a href="https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/dac_cjs-report_main_FINAL-DIGITAL.pdf">https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/dac_cjs-report_main_FINAL-DIGITAL.pdf</a></p> <p>Gibbs, V., &amp; Pellicano, E. (2023). 'Maybe we just seem like easy targets': A qualitative analysis of autistic adults' experiences of interpersonal violence. <i>Autism</i>, 27(7), 2021-2034.</p>

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	<p>Rumball, F., Happé, F., &amp; Grey, N. (2020). Experience of trauma and PTSD symptoms in autistic adults: Risk of PTSD development following DSM-5 and non-DSM-5 traumatic life events. <i>Autism Research, 13</i>(12), 2122-2132.</p> <p>Sedgewick, F., &amp; Douglas, S. (2023). <i>Understanding Autistic Relationships Across the Lifespan: Family, Friends, Lovers and Others</i>. Routledge.</p> <p>Trundle, G., Jones, K. A., Ropar, D., &amp; Egan, V. (2023). Prevalence of victimisation in autistic individuals: A systematic review and meta-analysis. <i>Trauma, Violence, &amp; Abuse, 24</i>(4), 2282-2296.</p> <p>9. Take appropriate action when online gender-based harm occurs, for example by taking action against users who repeatedly violate the service’s policies.</p> <p>We support penalties for and accountability of abuse, but this needs to move beyond mere banishment and involve other means of deterrence, such as financial restitution for victims and survivors. Simply removing repeat offenders from sites could be ineffective as they can easily create new accounts and it is noted that user banishment from early incel forums contributed to the misogynistic incel men’s movement today. There are also further challenges, such as the cost of human or AI content moderators, protecting free speech, societal normalisation of language associated with stalking, resulting in a significant volume of content requiring clearly defined harmful terms, and the risk of over-moderation driving users to other providers. This could result in a shift to closed user groups. However, the creation of fake accounts, as discussed previously, could be disrupted to prevent perpetrators from furthering their abusive actions in this manner.</p>
<p><b>Question 3:</b> Do you have any comments about the effectiveness, applicability or risks of the good practice steps or associated case studies we have highlighted in Chapter 3, 4 and 5? Are there any additional</p>	<p>Confidential? – N</p> <p>Victims' and survivors’ voices and experiences are notably absent from the case studies (and indeed throughout the guidance). We appreciate the focus on best practice and clear steps to mitigate abuse; however, showing this within the context of how someone is being</p>

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<p>examples of good practices we should consider? Please provide evidence to support your comment.</p>	<p>harmed emphasises the urgent necessity for prevention and intervention by the tech companies. Currently, case studies read as abstract examples, which do not convey how abuses are being perpetrated and how damaging these incidents are to those on the receiving end of them, as well as bystanders witnessing them online.</p>
<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you have any feedback on our approach to encouraging providers to follow this guidance, including our proposal to publishing an assessment of how providers are addressing women and girls’ safety? Do you have any examples or suggestions of other ways we could encourage providers to take up the ‘good practice’ recommendations?</p>	<p>Confidential? – N</p> <p>Incentivise platforms to demonstrate compliance through recognition programmes. Providers that implement guidance efficiently and effectively could have a badge to show their best practice in supporting women and girls on their platforms. This would mirror schemes such as <a href="https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-counteracting-illegal-hate-speech-online_en">https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-counteracting-illegal-hate-speech-online_en</a></p> <p>We recommend that this is monitored and reviewed regularly, and the procedure for awarding the recognition is overseen by a board of expert stakeholders, involving civil society victim-survivors and academics. This board could also contribute to dialogue, peer learning, and co-development of standards, shifting guidance from a top-down mandate to a collaborative forum.</p>
<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you have any comments on our impact assessment, rights assessment, or equality impact assessment? Please provide any information or evidence in support of your views.</p>	<p>Confidential? – N</p> <p>The effectiveness of these assessments will depend on whether they articulate how trade-offs between women and girls’ safety and freedom of expression are navigated, whether they fully engage with the differing experiences of marginalised persons (e.g., disabled women, racialised women, LGBTQ+ users), and the extent they include input or critique from independent experts or affected groups.</p> <p>Wherever possible, disaggregated data should be used: not just “women and girls” as a homogenous group, but sub-groups (e.g., black women, migrant women, trans women). Portions of the equality impact assessment should be designed with affected communities, such as</p>

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	<p>workshops, participatory research, and/ or victim-survivor panels. The Equality and Human Rights Commission highlights that equality impact assessments are most effective when grounded in lived experience and ongoing monitoring</p> <p><a href="https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/public-sector-equality-duty/assessing-impact-and-public-sector-equality-duty-scotland-1">https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/public-sector-equality-duty/assessing-impact-and-public-sector-equality-duty-scotland-1</a></p> <p>Research by Glitch UK and the End Violence Against Women Coalition demonstrates the disproportionate impact of online harms on women of colour and marginalised genders, emphasising the necessity of deeper intersectional analysis</p> <p><a href="https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Glitch-and-EVAW-The-Ripple-Effect-Online-abuse-during-COVID-19-Sept-2020.pdf">https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Glitch-and-EVAW-The-Ripple-Effect-Online-abuse-during-COVID-19-Sept-2020.pdf</a></p>
<p><b>Question 6:</b> Do you agree that our draft Guidance is likely to have positive effects on opportunities to use Welsh and treating Welsh no less favourably than English? If you disagree, please explain why, including how you consider the draft Guidance could be revised to have positive effects or more positive effects, or no adverse effects or fewer adverse effects on opportunities to use Welsh and treating Welsh no less favourably than English.</p>	

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