Backbench Parliamentary Debate: Tackling Online Harms

(1)   About the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys

The Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys charity is a research organisation focused on tackling the challenges facing men and boys in our society. It provides evidence-based research to support policymakers, and its trustees include Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Professor Roger Kirby and Will Hutton.

(2)   Executive Summary

See section 4 for statistics,

The political discourse, debate and policy on online harms should take a gender-sensitive lens so that it fully includes the online harms affecting men and boys alongside the harms affecting women and girls. Currently the focus is primarily, if not exclusively, on the latter. This does not help women and girls affected by the outcome of online harms that men and boys experience.

Ofcom, as mandated by the Online Safety Act (2023), is required to produce specific guidance for platforms to assess risk and to protect women and girls from online harms[1].The welcome guidance was produced by Ofcom in November 2025 after a lengthy consultation and titled "A safer life online for women and girls." It has so far refused to start working on similar guidance for men and boys and requires a political instruct for them to do so.

The policy request is for similar guidance for men and boys ("A safer life online for men and boys") who on the one hand are exposed to similar types of online harmful content to women and girls. But there are also clear differences in the types too. And even when there are similar types - the impact, framing and the actual content is likely to be different. These risks are also much more known now than when the Act was introduced.

Dramas such as *Adolescence* and Louis Theroux's *Inside the Manosphere* alongside a range of new research has shown the interest in online harms affecting men and boys but this has not been matched by policy responses focused on men and boys bar general provisions on misogyny and pornography This all happened after the Online Safety Act 2023 was created.

(3)   Background

There are a range of online harms (see next section) that particularly affect men and boys, however, the policy response from successive governments, has only focused specifically on women and girls

bar misogyny which clearly needs to be tackled. This can be seen by the Ofcom guidance published in November 2025 after a lengthy consultation and titled "A safer life online for women and girls

The debate and political discourse on online harms have primarily been about the online harms facing women and girls. When the emerging evidence shows it should be broadened to include the online harms affecting men and boys too. Guidance similar to that produced by Ofcom would be a significant step forward.

While the Act compels Ofcom to produce guidance for women and girls, it does not prevent it from producing guidance on men and boys. The only cost of producing this guidance is Ofcom's staff time. Ofcom has been asked but has refused so far because its remit is on the harms that "disproportionately affect women and girls" and falls back on the legislation as a reason. It will therefore take political intervention to move forward.

There is growing awareness about men and boys' online harms and their impact which was not the case when the Online Safety Act was drafted and going through Parliament. This has now changed with wider groups recognising the offline impact of the online world from the Mental Health Foundation through to Gamcare and others.

Guidance for men and boys speaks to the current and changed political narrative from the "problems men and boys cause," to the "problems men and boys have," and by fixing the problems some men and boys have, it helps fix the problems some cause others.

It is therefore a win:win, an "and" not an "or" conversation.

Guidance alongside taking a more gender-sensitive lens will mean:

- The public and policy makers will be more aware and gain a fuller picture of the overall online harms affecting men and boys alongside the individual harm types.
- Online harms affecting men and boys will be a distinct field of public policy and public protection in the online space. Only general policy provisions on misogyny and pornography have been announced but these are individual harm types. Online harms affecting men and boys are not being seen as a distinct and whole issue.
- This awareness will lead to more pressure and expectation on online providers to address those harms – and the algorithms that push the content.
- Politicians will be seen to be taking the online harms affecting men and boys seriously.
- Addressing online harms affecting men and boys will also address the negative outcomes these harms have for women and girls.

(4) Statistics

Below is a snapshot of some of the issues and statistics. Figures highlighted for women and girls are used for context not for "competition."

Men and boys on the one hand are exposed to similar types of online harmful content to women and girls. But there are also clear differences in the types too. And even when there are similar types - the impact, framing and the actual content is likely to be different.

The root cause of much of these harms are similar – isolation, over-use of social media (not enough time spent offline), lack of life opportunity, lack of education attainment, lack of support for broader problems (bullying, mental health), family dysfunction, community dysfunction and lack of male mentors/positive male role models.

1) Online Harm content views: 66% of men (65% women) had seen an online harm in the past four weeks - *Source: Ofcom State of Nation Report (2025)*. In Ofcom's data from its Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST), boys and girls; exposure to this type of content is similar with respect to seeing violence, bullying, self-harm, hate, extreme body-images and so forth.

2) Online Harm content regularity: Boys aged 11-17 saw on average 4.28 of 9 types of different online harms in the past 4 weeks (3.9 for girls) – *Source: Ofcom Children's Online Experiences (2025)*

3) Time spent online: Men aged 18-24 spend 6:07 hours online every day (6.33 women). For boys aged 13-14, the time spent online is 3:30 hours (4:28 for girls) - *Source: Ofcom State of Nation Report (2025*)

4) Online harms by gender: "When it comes to actual experience of online harms, men are more likely to encounter misinformation (41% vs 37%), scams or fraud (36% vs 31%) and hateful content (27% vs 24%). Women are more likely to experience unwelcome friend or follow requests (30% vs 26%), misogynistic content (23% vs 19%) and body image related content (21% vs 13%) – *Source: Ofcom State of Nation Report (2024)*

5) Intimate Image Abuse: 25% of boys have had explicit or intimate images or videos shared online which were shared by a partner (10% girls) – *Source: Youth Endowment Fund (2024).*

6) Sextortion: 91% of sextortion victims are male - *Source: Internet Watch Foundation (2024)*

7) Gambling: 53% of 11–17-year-old boys (31% of girls) see gambling adverts online every week – *Source: Gambling Commission (2025)*

8) Cryptocurrencies: 8% of 13- to 16-year-olds own cryptocurrencies – about 70% of crypto owners are male so this is more likely to affect them. Many organisations working with teenage boys report this is becoming more of an issue – *Source: Financial Conduct Authority (2024*)

9) Pornography: 19% of boys aged 13-14 access porn services every month (11% girls) – *Source: Ofcom announce new controls (2025)*

10) Stalking: 173,000 men were cyber-stalked in 2024/25 (382,000 women) in England and Wales – *Source: ONS stalking annual figures (2025)*

11) Physical Violence: 6% of men (3.5% women) have been threatened with physical violence online – *Source: The Alan Turing Institute*

12) Suicide/Self-Harm: 12% of boys aged (11-17) had seen content on suicide and self/harm in the previous four weeks (13% girls) – *Source: Ofcom Children's Online Experiences (2025)*. 149 teenage boys (15-19) died by suicide in England and Wales in 2024 (66 young women) and the suicide rate has increased in the last ten years - *Source: Office for National Statistics*

13) Body image: 26% of boys (54% of girls) said that images on social media have caused them to worry about their body image - *Source: Mental Health Foundation*. Looksmaxxing in young men was recently covered by the BBC and Australian research has linked social media to an increase in male steroid use.

14) Influencers: Movember research showed that in the UK 61% of young men regularly watch men and masculinity influencers and those who actively engage are more likely to exhibit more concerning behaviors and experiences, such as risk, depression, feel men should be the bosses and women are keeping men down *Source: Movember.*

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[1] Online Safety Act (2023): Section 54

OFCOM's guidance about protecting women and girls
(1) OFCOM must produce guidance for providers of Part 3 services which focuses on content and activity—
(a) in relation to which such providers have duties set out in this Part or Part 4, and

(b) which disproportionately affects women and girls.

(2) The guidance may, among other things—

(a) contain advice and examples of best practice for assessing risks of harm to women and girls from content and activity mentioned in subsection (1), and for reducing such risks.

(b) refer to provisions contained in a code of practice under section 41 which areparticularly relevant to the protection of women and girls from such content and activity