



Until we are all equal

FROM MEMES TO MISOGYNY:

The gendered content harming
our children on social media.





FOREWORD

ROSE CALDWELL, CEO

Social media should be a positive place where young people can learn, connect with friends, and understand the world. Yet findings paint a concerning picture of the online environments children navigate.

Our research shows that within just twenty minutes, algorithms begin pushing girls and boys into dramatically different online worlds. Girls are served content reinforcing narrow expectations of their appearance, behaviour and relationships, while boys are exposed to rigid ideas of masculinity, centred on wealth, dominance and self-sufficiency. Seven in ten girls and two-thirds of boys encounter messages online telling them how they should look, behave, dress, or what interests and careers to pursue.

While girls are more likely to recognise and reject sexist content, boys face a different challenge. Harmful messages are frequently disguised as humour, self-improvement or motivational advice, creating online echo chambers where misogyny and rigid ideas of masculinity are normalised and reinforced. Young people are exposed to these messages without seeking them out. What begins as a feed about sport, beauty or entertainment can quickly turn into videos that reinforce inequality, shape identity and even lead young people towards harmful content.

Children's rights and safety must come first. We do not believe the solution is to exclude young people from online spaces through social media bans.

The consequences extend beyond the screen. More than a quarter of children say they have changed how they act, dress or express themselves because of content they have seen online, rising to almost one in three girls. These messages threaten not only the wellbeing and safety of girls, but also boys' wellbeing and the progress towards a more equal society that generations have worked hard to achieve.

And we know from Plan International's work around the world that these challenges are not unique to the UK.

Children's rights and safety must come first. We do not believe the solution is to exclude young people from online spaces through social media bans. Young people want safer spaces, not a smaller world. Nearly two-thirds of 11-17-year-olds want harmful content to be removed or blocked. We are calling on the UK Government to strengthen the Online Safety Act and ensure technology companies are required to design products that put children's safety first.

This report should serve as a wake-up call. If we allow algorithms to amplify harmful gendered messages unchecked, we risk undermining decades of progress towards gender equality. The voices of children and young people must be at the heart of the decisions that affect them. Now is the time for government, regulators and industry to build a safer online world where every child can thrive.



FOREWORD

EDWINA, MEMBER OF THE YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL

As a member of the Youth Advisory Panel, I know that major parts of our lives as young people are deeply rooted in the online world, specifically on social media. This can be a two-edged sword: providing a sense of community, a place to socialise and platforms to express ourselves, but also exposing us to content that can have negative repercussions on our mental health and wellbeing.

In recent years, the online landscape has shifted rapidly. More than ever, young people globally, me included, are exposed to harmful content such as 'looksmaxxing' and 'red/pink pill' content. For boys, this can reinforce restrictive masculine norms, from pressure around appearance to feeling like vulnerability is something they should hide, shaping their understanding of masculinity before they have had the chance to form their own.

If these issues are not addressed effectively, damaging ideas around gender, identity, and self-worth will continue to shape young people's lives.

For girls, misogynistic content can go beyond how we see ourselves and affect how we are treated. I have seen young women harassed in public or recorded without consent through smart glasses, these moments are then shared online as entertainment.

It shows how online misogyny can influence what starts to feel acceptable in real life. I strive to keep my social media algorithms optimistic, where I am inspired by creatives and content that

positively influences my worldview. However, this report suggests that this may not be achievable for all young people, with 70% of girls and 67% of boys regularly seeing messages telling them how they should behave, act or dress. Constant exposure to these expectations can limit our sense of individuality, and make the online world feel daunting and difficult to navigate especially when unwanted content can enter our feeds without us ever searching for it.

Young people are too often spoken about in terms of the future, when the reality is that we are living and experiencing life today. It is therefore fundamental that young people are involved in decision-making around our online spaces. Rather than relying on quick-fix strategies, we should address the problems within the apps we use daily.

This is the time for changes to be implemented to ensure that our online space is protected from harm. If these issues are not addressed effectively, damaging ideas around gender, identity, and self-worth will continue to shape young people's lives. This report shows the significant, positive change that can be made, ensuring our online world is truly for us, by us.

“Content I’ve seen on social media has changed how I present myself. For example, if I’m popping to the shops, I’m now hyperaware that I might see someone I know and that it’s a bad thing if I don’t look put together. Or, if I’m going into professional space, I feel an expectation that my hair must look the best it’s ever been and I have to dress in a particular way. That has affected my behaviour - how I speak in rooms and how I act around people, especially with decision makers. But I shouldn’t be quieter just because I’m a woman, when men around me can be louder and more aggressive without facing the same scrutiny.”

Ealaf, 18, London



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media is now a central part of childhood. It is where children connect with friends, explore interests, learn about the world and express themselves. But our research shows these spaces are not neutral. Platforms are exposing children to a constant drip feed of gendered messages that can shape how they see themselves, others and what they believe is possible for their futures.

For girls and boys, these messages take different forms. Girls face narrow and often unattainable expectations about appearance, behaviour and relationships. Boys get served rigid ideas about masculinity, wealth, dominance and emotional self-sufficiency, often packaged as humour, motivation or self-improvement. These are two sides of the same system, with algorithms creating increasingly gendered online worlds.

Most concerningly, this can happen remarkably quickly. In our algorithmic testing, feeds became clearly gendered within the first 20 minutes of use. Within less than two hours, accounts could expose young people to increasingly specific and harmful gendered content. What starts as memes, sport, beauty, gaming or motivational content can become a pathway towards misogyny, rigid gender roles and anti-feminist narratives.

20 minutes

is how long it took for gendered content to appear in our test feeds.

This matters because social media does not simply reflect attitudes children already hold. It actively shapes them. When harmful ideas are presented repeatedly alongside familiar, entertaining and trusted content, they can become normalised before children can question them.

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Whilst the UK Government has taken some welcome steps to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG) as seen in the commitment to halve VAWG in a decade and to tackle harmful online content through the Online Safety Act (2023), we believe the evidence contained in this report demonstrates the need for greater and more urgent action.

This report is a **call to action**. The UK Government must take 'not illegal but harmful' content seriously, using all available levers to shift narratives, regulate platforms, and disrupt the pipeline from casual sexism to violent misogyny. Girls' rights, boys' wellbeing, and our collective safety depend on it.

FROM MEMES TO MISOGYNY IN MINUTES

Children spend significant amounts of time online. Among 7–18-year-olds who use TikTok, average daily use is 2.7 hours, while YouTube users spend two hours a day on average. Across ages 7–17, 90% use video-first platforms such as YouTube and TikTok.

Much of this activity is passive. Children told us about spending long periods scrolling through short-form videos, memes, collages and carousels, often when bored or late at night. They are not necessarily choosing what they see; algorithms decide what comes next.

Short-form content is designed to be consumed quickly, with little time to stop and reflect. Repetition makes messages familiar, while humour can make harmful ideas appear harmless. A misogynistic message delivered as a meme or joke may be harder to recognise as harmful, particularly for children who have not yet developed the tools to critically assess what they see.

For this research, we developed a survey, hosted workshops, and performed algorithmic persona testing. This testing involved setting up six TikTok new profiles, to understand the different experiences of the algorithm for girls and boys. Our algorithmic testing demonstrates how rapidly platforms personalise these experiences.

7 in 10

girls have seen messages online telling them how they should behave, act, dress or what careers and interests they should pursue.

Accounts created around different ages, genders and interests quickly saw different gendered content. A boy interested in football, gaming or humour could begin to encounter messages about masculinity alongside that content, while a girl interested in beauty or fashion could be served increasingly narrow expectations about how she should look and behave.

This creates a pipeline in which harmful content does not announce itself as harmful. It is introduced through familiar interests and trusted



Nashwa, 19, a member of the Youth Advisory Panel.

Plan International UK / Marc Sethi

formats, gradually becoming more extreme. For boys, misogynistic content could begin with memes or self-improvement before developing into narratives portraying women or feminism as the source of their problems.

The speed of this process is critical. Children can move from benign content to misogynistic messaging within a single session. Harm does not require a child to seek out extremist material or deliberately enter a harmful community.

The algorithm can bring it to them.

GIRLS AND BOYS ARE PUSHED INTO DIFFERENT ONLINE WORLDS

The content children encounter is gendered in both subject matter and expectations. We asked children whether they had seen or heard content on social media telling them how they should act, dress, behave, what jobs they should do, and what hobbies and interests they should have. Seven in ten girls (70%) have seen at least one – highlighting the breadth and consistency of these pressures in their daily lives, while almost seven in ten boys (67%) have seen at least one of these gendered messages.

For girls, appearance is a major theme. More than half of girls (54%) reported seeing gendered messaging telling them how they should dress, rising to 62% among girls aged 11–17. Girls described highly specific expectations around body shape, facial features, makeup, clothing and femininity. The ideal promoted was often slender, conventionally attractive (to White, Western standards), and highly curated. These standards can be particularly harmful for girls from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

54% of girls reported seeing gendered messaging telling them how they should dress.



Girls described beauty filters and content promoting predominantly White and European beauty ideals, including filters that dramatically lightened the skin of Black and South Asian girls. Algorithmic testing similarly found a lack of diversity in the ethnicity and body types of beauty creators being promoted.

Girls also encounter messages about how they should behave and what relationships should look like. Content promoting the “clean girl”, “soft life” or stay-at-home girlfriend aesthetic can present submission, domesticity and dependence as aspirational. Attractive lifestyles, luxury products and relationship advice can make restrictive gender roles appear desirable rather than limiting.

Harm does not require a child to seek out extremist material or deliberately enter a harmful community. The algorithm can bring it to them.

Boys encounter a different but equally restrictive set of expectations. Their feeds promoted muscular bodies, particular facial features, wealth, independence, self-discipline and dominance. Looksmaxxing content encouraged boys to identify perceived flaws in their appearance and work towards an idealised masculine body and face.

Crucially, boys often interpreted this content as motivational. They recognised that the standards were difficult to achieve and sometimes acknowledged that the content could make boys feel bad about themselves, but still described it as inspirational. This makes the harm harder to identify. When a message is presented as advice about becoming more successful, attractive or disciplined, a young person may not recognise that it is reinforcing a narrow and potentially damaging model of masculinity.

Concerningly, harmful gender stereotypes are not simply surviving online – they are being monetised, packaged and algorithmically pushed to children, with girls encouraged to equate femininity with beauty, luxury and dependence, while boys are fed messages that masculinity and self-worth depend on wealth and financial success. This gendered economy reinforces outdated expectations, positioning girls as passive recipients of male wealth and boys as pressured breadwinners, while algorithms amplify emotionally charged, aspirational content that turns harmful gender norms into profitable online influence.

BOYS ARE BEING DRAWN INTO AN ECHO CHAMBER OF MISOGYNY

The research is particularly concerning in relation to boys because they appear to have fewer visible counter-narratives to the gendered messages they encounter.

Our testing found that a vulnerable boy persona was quickly exposed to misogynistic content embedded within memes and anime edits. By the second day, content had begun framing gender relations through grievance and victimhood. By the third, this had developed into narratives suggesting that men are overlooked or unfairly treated by women and society.

23% of UK adults believe that gender equality has a negative affect on men.

This reflects the wider manosphere – a loose network of online communities, influencers and content that promote rigid and often harmful ideas about masculinity and gender relations. The danger is not simply that children encounter extreme misogyny, but that they can be drawn towards it through content that initially appears helpful, entertaining or aspirational.

For boys experiencing uncertainty about confidence, relationships, loneliness or their future, self-improvement content can offer answers. But those answers can gradually shift towards blame: women are responsible for men's difficulties; feminism has gone too far; men must dominate rather than cooperate; and emotional vulnerability is weakness. In turn, this has a direct and harmful impact on girls.

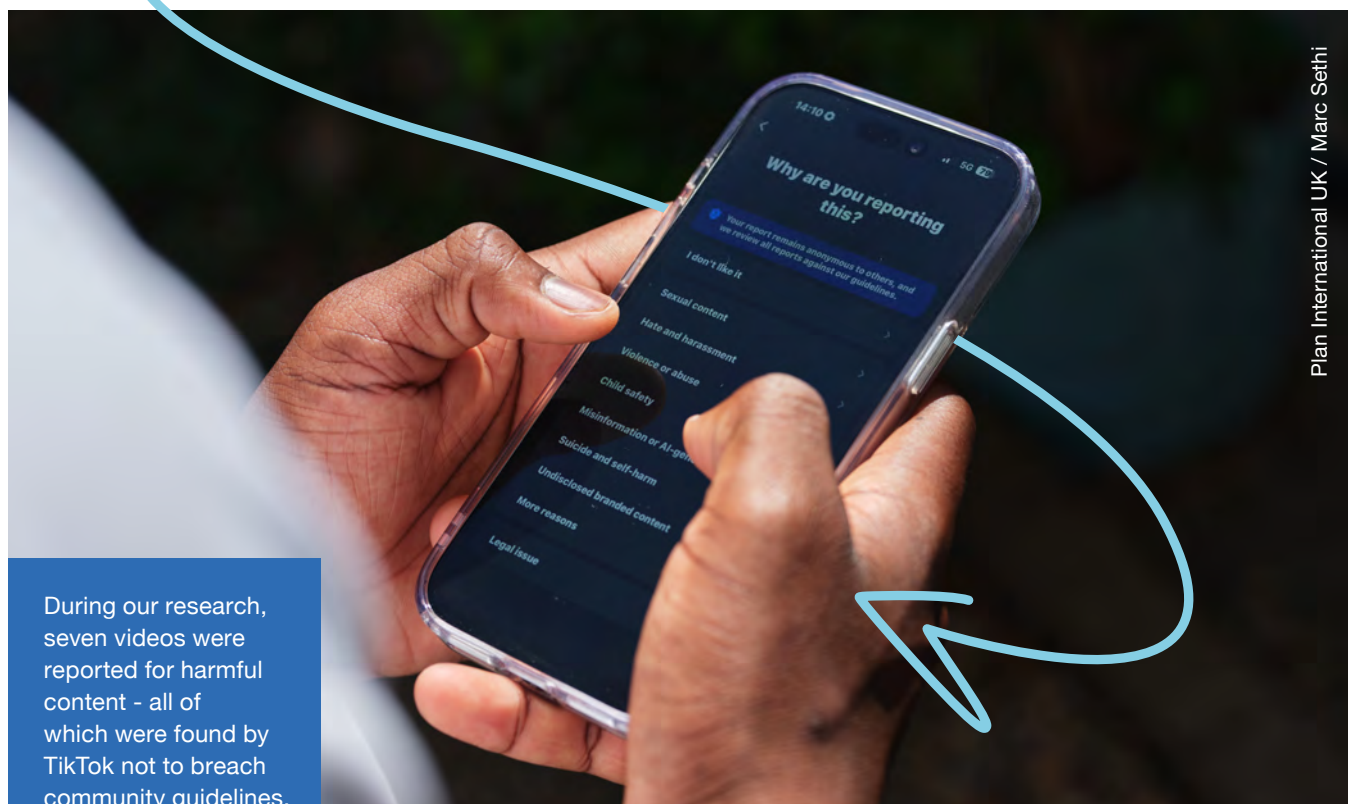
Girls in our workshops were often able to identify sexist content, challenge beauty standards and draw on feminist ideas or peer communities to resist harmful messages. This did not protect them completely but gave them a language to question what they were seeing.

Girls are encouraged to equate femininity with beauty, luxury and dependence, while boys are fed messages that masculinity and self-worth depend on wealth and financial success.

Boys did not demonstrate the same access to alternative narratives. Restrictive expectations around wealth, physical strength, independence and dominance were often treated as normal or aspirational. **This creates an 'empty space' where healthier models of masculinity should be.**

MISOGYNY IS MAINSTREAM – AND IT DOES NOT STAY ONLINE

The impact extends beyond individual social media experiences. More than one in four children aged 7–17 (27%) said they had seen content online that stopped them from acting, dressing or behaving in a way they wanted to. For girls, this rises to almost one in three (32%), compared with 23% of boys.



During our research, seven videos were reported for harmful content - all of which were found by TikTok not to breach community guidelines.

Children described online expectations reinforcing messages they were already encountering at home, at school and through wider culture. Girls spoke about being expected to “lay low” while boys take the lead. Boys described traditional gender roles – men as providers and women as carers – as simply “normal”.

Online and offline harms cannot be treated separately. Social media can amplify and aggravate existing stereotypes, while those stereotypes provide fertile ground for algorithms to exploit. The result is a feedback loop in which harmful gender norms are reinforced across children’s lives.

There are also signs that misogyny is moving from the margins into mainstream culture. Plan International UK polling found that 23% of UK adults believe the advancement of gender equality has had a negative impact on men, while 20% believe a return to traditional gender roles would benefit society. Among 18–24-year-olds, these figures rise to 32% and 29% respectively.¹

Language originating in niche misogynistic communities is now familiar to young people. Among girls and young women, 87% recognise “simp”, 93% recognise “body count” and 66% recognise “looksmaxxing”.² These are no longer obscure terms confined to fringe communities; they are part of the everyday digital environment.

The consequences are serious. Girls can be made to feel that their bodies, behaviour and choices are constantly judged. Boys can be drawn towards models of masculinity equating success with wealth, dominance and emotional isolation. Both are denied the freedom to develop identities beyond narrow gender expectations.

Because attitudes shaped online are carried into schools, friendships and relationships, these harms can reinforce wider inequalities and contribute to a culture in which misogyny and violence are normalised.

¹ Plan International UK (2025) Nationally representative survey of 2,050 adults in the UK run by Opinium Research between 17th and 19th September 2025.

² Plan International UK (2026) Nationally representative survey of 1,000 females in the UK aged 16 to 24 conducted by Opinium Research between the 3rd and 10th April 2026.

CHILDREN WANT A SAFER INTERNET – NOT SIMPLY A SMALLER ONE

Children themselves are clear about what needs to change. They want online spaces that are kinder, less judgemental and safer. Almost two-thirds (62%) of 11- to 17-year-olds want harmful content removed or blocked, rising to 70% among girls. At the same time, 68% of 11- to 17-year-olds oppose a blanket social media ban.

This distinction is critical. Children do not want to be excluded from digital spaces central to their friendships, interests and lives. They are asking for those spaces to work better. A blanket ban, as proposed by the current UK Government, will not remove misogyny from young people's lives. It will not change the algorithms recommending harmful content, the business models rewarding

62% of 11- to 17-year-olds want harmful content removed or blocked from their feeds.

engagement, or the gender norms children encounter offline. It could instead push some young people towards secretive use, making it harder to seek help or discuss what they encounter.

The answer must be a safer internet, not simply a smaller one.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Children have told us what they need. The responsibility now lies with the UK Government, platforms and wider society to act.

Put young people at the heart of digital policy

We're calling on the UK Government to establish a Youth Council for Online Futures – because decisions about young people's online lives should never be made without them.

Guidance doesn't cut it – Regulate for real change

Voluntary promises from platforms have failed. Children's safety cannot be left to chance—or to corporate goodwill. That's why we're calling on Parliament to take bold action and strengthen the Online Safety Act (2023).

Make algorithms safe and transparent for every child

Big Tech cannot keep marking its own homework. The UK Government should require social media platforms to identify, prevent and mitigate algorithmic systems that expose children to harmful gendered content.

Make tackling misogyny a national priority

For the first time, the UK Government has declared VAWG a national emergency, with a pledge to halve it within a decade. If we are serious about achieving that ambition, we must address one of its root causes: the normalisation of misogyny.

The choice is clear: a safer internet, not simply a smaller one.

“My younger brother is 12, and I can see how easily children are influenced online. I always tell him that if he sees something that feels wrong or confusing, to talk to me. I think young people need people they can trust, maybe not parents but people older than them that they can look up to like older brother or sister just so they can have someone to talk to about what they are seeing online. My brother has shown me content that was clearly not appropriate for his age. I tell him to block it, report it where possible, and always come to me if he is unsure.”

Ilyas, 19, Manchester



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