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Department for Science, Innovation & Technology

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Ms Jilly Rogers
President and Trustee
National Council of Women GB
info@ncwgb.org

Our Ref: TO2025-00008470-NR

Dear Ms Rogers,

Thank you for your correspondence of 28 April addressed to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Rt Hon Peter Kyle MP, regarding a number of critically important issues. I am replying as a member of the Ministerial Support Team and sincerely apologise for the delay in you receiving a response.

We agree that the UK must lead globally in countering harms online and tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG). As a result, the government has made an ambitious commitment to halve VAWG in the next decade, including online VAWG. The implementation of the Online Safety Act ('the act') is a key step to help tackle VAWG online. The act will be overseen and enforced by the independent regulator, Ofcom.

The act places a requirement on all tech platforms to proactively tackle the most harmful illegal content, much of which disproportionately affects women and girls, including harassment, sexual exploitation, stalking, controlling or coercive behaviour, extreme pornography and intimate image abuse. In addition, all services will have duties to remove other illegal content when it is flagged to them and take action to protect children from content which is harmful to them, including violent content.

The strongest protections in the act are for children. Services which are likely to be accessed by children are required to take measures to protect them from harmful content which doesn't meet the criminal threshold. This includes preventing them from seeing the most harmful content such as pornography, and content that promotes, encourages or provides instructions for self-harm, suicide and eating disorders.

Regarding harmful algorithms, the act requires providers to specifically consider, as part of their risk assessments, how algorithms could impact children's exposure to illegal content and content which is harmful to children on their service. If a provider's risk assessment identifies that habit-forming or addictive behaviour is an activity which risks causing significant harm to an appreciable number of children on their service, the act will require providers to put in place measures to mitigate and manage this risk.

The act will also place duties on the largest services (known as 'Category 1' services) to remove content that is prohibited in their terms of service and will require these platforms to put in place user empowerment tools, enabling adult users to have greater control over their online experience. These tools, when applied, will reduce the likelihood of women encountering abusive content targeted at them or others on the basis of their sex. Women (and adult users) will also be able to filter out content from unverified users. This will give adults greater control over their online experience and help individuals to shield themselves from anonymous abuse.

The act requires Ofcom, the regulator, to publish guidance about protecting women and girls online, which they published in draft for consultation on 25 February. The government expects services to refer to this guidance when implementing protections for users.

The guidance summarises measures that platforms can take to tackle the abuse that women and girls disproportionately face online. This will ensure that it is easier for platforms to implement holistic and effective protections for women and girls across their various duties.

Regarding deepfakes, the government recognises the challenges that AI-generated content, including deepfakes, can pose to the online environment and its potential impact on societal and democratic processes.   We are working closely with our international partners to tackle this shared challenge. The Paris AI Action Summit in February 2025 reinforced the government's commitment to international collaboration on the risks of frontier AI being used to generate mis/disinformation.

The government has also made a manifesto commitment to ban the creation of sexually explicit deepfake images, and we are legislating to criminalise this behaviour in the Data (Use and Access) Bill, ensuring that offenders face the appropriate punishments for this atrocious harm.

Where AI is used to generate sexual deepfakes of children, UK law is clear. Creating, possessing, or distributing child sexual abuse images, including those that are AI generated, is already illegal, regardless of whether it depicts a real child or not. The act makes clear that technology companies will be required to identify this content proactively and remove it. The government is committed to giving law enforcement the powers they need to keep pace with criminal use of emerging technologies. We have introduced a new offence in the Crime and Policing Bill to criminalise AI models that are optimised to create child sexual abuse material.

The sharing of or threatening to share a deepfake intimate image without consent is already a criminal offence. It has also been designated as a 'priority offence' for providers 'illegal content duties' under the Online Safety Act in November 2024. Companies in scope of the act's illegal safety duties will be required to focus on tackling this type of content, preventing its proliferation online.

Regarding bias within AI, in 2024, The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology ran the Fairness Innovation Challenge, a grant challenge providing over £465,000 of funding to develop novel solutions to address bias and discrimination in AI systems. The Challenge funded four winning teams to develop bias audit solutions across four different sectors, including higher education, finance, healthcare and recruitment.

I hope this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Ministerial Support Team