

Dangerous by Design

Evidence for action on online violence against women and girls and the path to safer online spaces

September 2026



Refuge

For women and children.
Against domestic violence.

**END
VIOLENCE
AGAINST
WOMEN**



Contents

<i>Forewords</i>	3
<i>Executive summary</i>	4
<i>Recommendations</i>	8
<i>Methodology</i>	9
<i>Policy context</i>	10
<i>1. Women's access to online spaces</i>	11
<i>2. The prevalence of online VAWG in the UK</i>	12
<i>3. Perpetrators of online VAWG</i>	17
<i>4. Algorithmic systems are normalising VAWG</i>	18
<i>5. AI technology: new ways to perpetrate VAWG</i>	20
<i>6. The impact of online VAWG on women</i>	23
<i>7. The response to online VAWG</i>	24

Forewords

"This report comes almost one year after Ofcom introduced its guidance for tech companies on how to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG) on online platforms. Despite being a welcome step forward, Refuge has long been clear that voluntary guidance lacks the force needed to address the shocking levels of abuse and violence faced by women and girls online every day. Our report testifies to this, shining a light on the sheer scale of harm that women in this country are experiencing and the lack of confidence they have in tech companies, the criminal justice system, and policymakers to protect them. These findings are reflective of a system that has continued to prioritise profits over safety, leaving women to pay the price. This cannot continue. The Government and Ofcom must go much further in holding tech companies legally responsible for combatting the normalisation of misogyny, holding perpetrators to account, and keeping all women and survivors safe."

Gemma Sherrington, Refuge CEO

"All women and girls deserve to live free from violence and abuse. This report is a stark reminder of the ways in which online VAWG is a major feature of women's everyday lives to devastating effect, particularly for young women. The status quo is untenable and the Government's efforts to prevent VAWG need to confront the business model of big tech, with a regulatory system which has the teeth to hold them to account. A world in which such violence and abuse is routine carries wider consequences for society at large – for our relationships and gender equality, our sense of safety, and democracy. We urge the Government to take this opportunity to reflect and change course."

Janaya Walker, ERAW Interim Director

Executive summary

Drawing on nationally representative polling of 2,000 women aged 16 and over in the UK, this joint research report from Refuge and the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) provides new evidence on the scale, nature and impact of online VAWG. We are uniquely placed in investigating this issue: Refuge is a specialist domestic abuse service provider, operating a dedicated Technology-Facilitated Abuse and Economic Empowerment service, while EVAW is a coalition of over 170 specialist women's support services, researchers, activists, survivors and NGOs working to end violence against women and girls in all its forms. Together, we bring expertise from frontline support services, survivors' experiences, advocacy and campaigning.

Online spaces are central to how we connect with others, express ourselves, build relationships, work, access information and participate in public discourse. Social media platforms, dating services, gaming platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies now form part of the infrastructure of everyday life – 94% of the women we surveyed use a social media platform at least once or twice a week. Yet these same spaces have created new opportunities for violence against women and girls

and enabled existing forms of VAWG, including misogyny, sexual violence and domestic abuse to be perpetrated at a greater scale and speed.

For many women, abuse, harassment and exposure to misogynistic content have become an 'accepted risk' of participating in online spaces, or a reality which curtails their freedom to participate at all. Our research confirms that online VAWG is widespread and deeply embedded in women's experiences online, with 1 in 3 (36%) women, and 47% young women aged 16-24, reporting that they had experienced some form of online VAWG.

According to our research, a quarter (25%) of women in the UK report having experienced misogyny or sexual violence online; 1 in 5 (21%) report having experienced online harms suggestive of coercive control, stalking, monitoring or harassment, while almost 1 in 5 (18%) report having experienced some form of image-based sexual abuse. Among these women, our findings show that young women aged 16-24 face particularly high levels of harm across every category measured, with 38% reporting that they have experienced misogyny and sexual violence online, 30% reporting experiences of online harms suggestive of coercive control, stalking, monitoring or harassment, and 31% reporting they have experienced some form of image-based sexual abuse.

While our findings about women with protected characteristics are indicative only, and additional research is needed, they illustrate that specific groups of women are also disproportionately impacted by online VAWG. For example, our findings suggest that misogyny and sexual violence disproportionately affect LGBTQIA+

1 in 3 (36%) women reported experiencing some form of online VAWG, rising to 47% of young women aged 16-24

women (57%) and Disabled women (34%) and suggest that LGBTQIA+ women and Disabled women are more likely to experience online harms suggestive of coercive control, stalking, monitoring or harassment (46% and 29% respectively), as well as image-based sexual abuse (42% of LGBTQIA+ women and 24% of Disabled women).

Our research also highlighted the intersectional harms faced by Black and minoritised women, with almost 1 in 10 (9%) reporting that they have experienced racist harassment, abuse or comments online, and 1 in 20 (4%) reporting that they have experienced racist sexual abuse, harassment and comments online. It is worth noting that our findings relating to Black and minoritised women's experiences of online VAWG are potentially lowered by existing self-censorship and safety work in online spaces due to the known levels of harm they will encounter.¹ Wider research indicates that this curtailment of women's freedoms is often felt more acutely by Black and minoritised women,² and additional research is needed to improve insight into these experiences.

The abuse and harassment women experience online is perpetrated by a range of actors. Among women who reported that they had experienced some form of online VAWG, the most commonly identified perpetrator was a stranger (53%) followed by a current or former partner (22%) and friend or family member (19%). For women who knew the perpetrator of online abuse against them, the most common type of relationship was former partner, with 20% of women, rising to 25% of young women aged 16-24, reporting abuse by this type of perpetrator.

Our findings also point to the prevalence of pile-ons and coordinated harassment for women. Almost 1 in 10 (9%) women who said they experienced some form of online VAWG reported experiencing harms perpetrated by a group of strangers, rising to 17% (almost 1 in 6) Black and minoritised women.

The most commonly identified perpetrator was a stranger (53%) followed by a current or former partner (22%) and friend or family member (19%)

We know that tech companies profit from content that normalises VAWG, operating algorithmic systems that push toxic, misogynistic content – primarily to men and boys – to maximise ad revenue.³ However, findings from our research show that women are routinely exposed to this kind of content too. 1 in 12 (8%) women who use social media regularly, reported encountering content on their feeds that is humiliating, degrading or sexually violent towards women most or every time they use the platform. This rose to 1 in 7 (14%) LGBTQIA+ women, 1 in 7 (14%) Black and minoritised women, and 1 in 5 (21%) young women aged 16-24.

The consequences of online VAWG for women are significant – affecting women's mental health, wellbeing and physical safety. Many women who experienced online VAWG reported anxiety, fear, panic attacks, reduced confidence and self-esteem as a direct result.



¹ For example, research found that Black and minority ethnic women were 34% more likely to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets than white women: Amnesty (2018) *Women abused on Twitter every 30 seconds - new study*

² Glitch, UK (2023) *The Digital Misogynoir Report: Ending the dehumanising of Black women on social media*

³ Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, 'Oral evidence: *Misogyny: the manosphere and online content*', HC 867 (21st May 2025)



14% of women who reported experiencing online VAWG stopped using the platform altogether as a result of the abuse

Alarmingly, 7% of women who experienced online VAWG reported that it made them feel suicidal, rising to 15% of young women aged 16-24.

Online VAWG is also actively infringing on women's capacity to remain online safely and poses a chilling effect to their right to freedom of expression. Our research found that 1 in 7 (14%) women who experienced some form of online VAWG stopped using the platform altogether as a result of the abuse.

Despite the scale and impact of these harms, our research shows that women have little confidence that existing systems can protect them. Fewer than 1 in 3 (29%) women who experienced some form of online VAWG reported it to the platform where it occurred, and only 1 in 8 (12%) reported it to the police. Many women told us they did not report because they believed they would not be taken seriously or did not trust that meaningful action would be taken. Among those who did report, satisfaction with platform and police responses was consistently low.

Together, these findings indicate that women often navigate these online environments independently. Harmful and illegal content is routinely under-moderated, and little is done to tackle the business models that proliferate online VAWG or to design or regulate platforms and new technologies with safety in mind. At the same time, criminal offences are frequently under-enforced, and there are currently few other routes to justice and safety.

Our research also highlights women's growing concern around the implications of AI technology for women and girls' safety and wellbeing. Two thirds (66%) of the women we surveyed are concerned about the role of AI technologies in enabling abuse and violence against women and girls, while 66% are also not confident that the Government is doing enough to regulate AI in the context of women's safety and wellbeing.

Despite these concerns, generative AI technology, such as AI chatbots, are increasingly central to women's everyday lives, with 44% of the women we surveyed reporting using an AI chat system on a regular basis, rising to 80% of young women aged

Fewer than 1 in 3 (29%) women who said they experienced online VAWG reported it to the platform where it occurred, and only 1 in 8 (12%) reported it to the police



16-24. 1 in 6 (17%) women aged 16-24 say they have been provided dating, sex and relationships advice from an AI technology that they perceive to be inappropriate, unhealthy or unsafe in the context of women's safety and wellbeing.

Despite the introduction of the Online Safety Act in 2023, and the subsequent publication of Ofcom's VAWG Guidance in 2025,⁴ which sets out how tech companies can address harms disproportionately impacting women and girls, this report demonstrates that the current approach to regulating online platforms and emerging technologies is not sufficient.

We welcomed the ambition of many of the 'good practice' steps presented in Ofcom's VAWG Guidance, which represent a genuine attempt to strengthen protections for women and girls online, with a greater emphasis on preventative measures. However, the findings in this report reinforce our concerns that tech companies will not be incentivised to adopt good practice on VAWG without proper enforcement powers. Voluntary

recommendations, with no penalties for non-compliance, cannot match the scale and impact of the harm that women are experiencing online.

Women and girls should not have to limit their participation, modify their behaviour, or leave online spaces to stay safe. The responsibility for preventing and responding to online VAWG must sit with the Government, Ofcom, and the tech companies who design and profit from the online spaces in which misogyny and abuse currently thrive.

66% of women are concerned about the role of AI technologies in enabling abuse and violence against women and girls

⁴ Ofcom (25 November 2025) *A Safer Life Online for Women and Girls Practical Guidance for Tech Companies*



Recommendations

If the Government is serious about its commitment to halve violence against women and girls within a decade,⁵ it must take stronger action to address the role that online platforms and emerging technologies play in enabling it, improve the response when it occurs, and advance access to justice for victims and survivors. This should include:

- Strengthening the Online Safety Act to enable Ofcom's VAWG Guidance to be upgraded to a legally enforceable Code of Practice
- Defining and mandating safety by design principles across online services through the introduction of a Safety by Design Code of Practice⁶
- Expanding civil routes to justice for victims and survivors of image-based sexual abuse beyond the criminal justice system, with greater commitments to prevention through education⁷
- Introducing an online safety commission or ombuds role that can provide specialist support, information and advocacy to victims and survivors of online VAWG⁸
- Adopting a robust regulatory approach to AI, including AI chatbots, that prioritises safety by design and the protection of women and girls
- Improving the criminal justice response to online VAWG through mandatory training for police and prosecutors
- Providing sustainable funding for specialist services supporting victims and survivors of online VAWG by ringfencing 10% of the income generated by the Digital Services Tax and ringfencing 10% of all fines levied against tech companies under the Online Safety Act⁹

⁵ Home Office (2025) *Freedom from violence and abuse: a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls*

⁶ Online Safety Act Network (May 2026) *Safety by Design Code of Practice*

⁷ See *Stop Image-based Abuse*, in partnership with Glamour, #NotYourPorn, EVAW and Professor Clare McGlynn (2024)

⁸ See *Stop Image-based Abuse*, in partnership with Glamour, #NotYourPorn, EVAW and Professor Clare McGlynn (2024)

⁹ See Glitch, *UK's Tech Tax campaign ask* (2024)



Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on a nationally representative survey of women aged 16 and over in the United Kingdom. The survey was carried out by Opinium between 23rd April and 5th May 2026.

The survey asked all respondents a range of questions including about their use of online platforms (social media, dating, gaming and AI chatbots) and their views relating to women's safety and wellbeing online, including the role of the Government and tech companies in addressing online VAWG, and access to justice. Women were also given the option to answer a series of questions about whether they had personally experienced different forms of online VAWG, with subsequent questions on its impact on them, and actions taken as a result.

Limitations:

1. The number of women who consented to answering questions about whether they had personally experienced online VAWG is 1,483. Prevalence findings based on this sample have been rebased to 2,000 to create a nationally representative sample, taking into consideration those who did not consent to answering. The numbers of women experiencing online VAWG are therefore likely to be higher than those presented in this report, as we cannot equate women who did not consent to answering with not having experienced it.
2. All findings presented in this survey that are based on protected characteristics are indicative only. While the data was weighted on ethnicity, the survey was not sampled to be nationally representative in terms of ethnicity, sexuality and disability. Please also note that we use the term 'Black and minoritised women' to refer to those from Black, Asian, and other racially minoritised ethnic groups who experience systemic inequalities, discrimination, and specific forms of male violence.
3. Illustrative survivor stories included in this report are based on Refuge's casework with survivors accessing support from our tech-facilitated abuse service within the past three years, and from EVAW's campaigning and advocacy work with survivors. These survivors did not participate in the survey. All survivors' names have been changed to protect their identity.



Policy context

There has been some progress in addressing online VAWG in recent years. The Online Safety Act (2023) introduced legal duties on user-to-user services (e.g. social media, gaming and dating platforms) and search services to protect their users from illegal content and content that is harmful to children. It provides Ofcom, the regulator, with powers to enforce these duties.

When the Act was first introduced to Parliament, women and girls were not mentioned once within the legislation. As part of a wider coalition, ERAW and Refuge campaigned for greater recognition in the legislation of the harms women and girls face online and called for a legally enforceable VAWG Code of Practice to be introduced.¹⁰ Thanks to our campaigning, the Government made important amendments to the legislation. Several VAWG-related criminal offences were designated ‘priority offences’ under the Online Safety Act. This means that tech companies must proactively prevent and remove content related to these offences in line with steps laid out in Ofcom’s Illegal Content Codes of Practice. Additionally, Ofcom was required to produce industry VAWG guidance for tech companies on tackling illegal and harmful content that disproportionately affects women and girls.

Ofcom’s VAWG Guidance was published in November 2025.¹¹ It sets out a range of actions that online services can take to address VAWG, through ‘foundational steps’ and ‘good practice steps’. Tech companies must follow the ‘foundational steps’ to meet their duties under the Online Safety Act as they relate to illegal content and the protection of children. The ‘good practice steps’ are additional recommended measures that tech companies can adopt to go further in improving women and girls’ online safety.

Our findings demonstrate that voluntary recommendations are not sufficient for meeting the scale and impact of online VAWG, reinforcing the clear need to upgrade the VAWG Guidance to an enforceable Code of Practice. However, we note the limit of Ofcom’s existing enforcement powers.¹² To be truly effective, it must be empowered to take swifter and more robust enforcement action against tech companies who do not comply with their duties under the Online Safety Act than it is able to at present.

¹⁰ A draft VAWG Code of Practice (2021) was drafted by Professor Clare McGlynn, Professor Lorna Woods, with Carnegie UK, Glitch, NSPCC, 5Rights Foundation, ERAW and Refuge

¹¹ Ofcom (25 November 2025) *A Safer Life Online for Women and Girls Practical Guidance for Tech Companies*

¹² See Online Safety Act Network (24 February 2026) *Ofcom’s enforcement of the OSA: some initial reflections*; and Ofcom (13 February 2026) *Letter from Ofcom’s Group Director, Online Safety to Jess Asato MP*

Women's access to online spaces

We use online services to communicate and socialise, build relationships, work, learn, take part in public discourse and access support and services. Online VAWG therefore must be regarded as central to addressing VAWG. When women and girls are harassed, subjected to sexual violence, stalked, monitored and controlled online, it impacts every part of their lives, affecting their physical safety, mental wellbeing, freedom of expression and social, political and economic participation.

Our research reaffirms the central role that online platforms play in women's lives. Almost all the women (94%) we surveyed regularly use social media, rising to 100% of young women aged 16-24. In addition, nearly 1 in 10 (9%) women and 1 in 4 (24%) young women aged 16-24 regularly use a dating platform, and 1 in 5 (19%) women and over half (59%) of young women aged 16-24 regularly use a gaming platform. Significantly, only 1 in 10 (10%) women who regularly use an online social media, dating or gaming platform think that tech companies are doing enough to protect women and girls online on their platforms.

Only 1 in 10 (10%) women who regularly use an online social media, dating or gaming platform think that tech companies are doing enough to protect women and girls online on their platforms.

These findings underline the importance of ensuring that these online services are safe for women to access. For many, participation in online spaces is not optional, and women cannot be expected to limit their risk of gender-based harm by reducing their presence in them. A safety by design approach to regulation is essential, and swift action must be taken to hold tech companies to account when they fail to adequately protect users from experiencing VAWG on their platforms.

94% of women reported that they regularly use a social media platform, 9% regularly use a dating platform and 19% regularly use a gaming platform



The prevalence of online VAWG in the UK

Our findings confirm that online VAWG is a widespread feature of women's experiences online, with 1 in 3 (36%) women reporting that they have experienced some form of online VAWG. This encompasses a range of harms perpetrated by people they know, including current or former partners, family, friends, classmates or colleagues, as well as people they don't know, including strangers, and, crucially, groups of strangers, while others simply do not know the identity of the perpetrator. Our research shows that these harms are not distributed equally. Young women aged 16-24 consistently reported higher rates of abuse: 47% reported experiencing some form of online VAWG. Similarly, our research also suggests online VAWG compounds existing forms of inequality and that women with protected characteristics are disproportionately impacted: 47% Disabled women and 65% LGBTQIA+ women reported that they had experienced some form of online VAWG.

Misogyny and sexual violence

Our research found that 1 in 4 (25%) women in the UK report having experienced misogyny and sexual violence online. This includes almost 1 in 10 (9%) who reported having been sexually harassed online, almost 1 in 7 (15%) who reported receiving unwelcome messages or images of a sexual nature that made them feel uncomfortable and more than 1 in 10 (11%) who reported receiving sexist or misogynistic comments online.

The prevalence among young women is particularly stark. Over 1 in 3 (38%) young women aged 16-24 reported experiencing misogyny and sexual violence online. This includes almost 1 in 5

25% of women reported experiencing online misogyny and sexual violence, rising to 38% of young women aged 16-24

(18%) young women who reported that they have been sexually harassed online and 1 in 8 (12%) who confirmed that they have received threats of physical or sexual violence online (compared to 6% of women overall).

Our findings suggest that misogyny and sexual violence disproportionately affect LGBTQIA+ women: 57% reported experiencing misogyny and sexual violence online. This includes a worrying 18% of LGBTQIA+ women who reported receiving threats of physical or sexual violence online.

Our research also found that 34% of Disabled women reported experiencing misogyny and sexual violence online, and highlighted the intersectional harms faced by women who encounter both racialised and gendered forms of online abuse. Almost 1 in 10 (9%) Black and minoritised women reported that they have experienced racist harassment abuse or comments online and 1 in 20 (4%) reported that they have experienced racist sexual abuse, comments and harassment online. It is also important to note that

1 in 8 (12%) young women aged 16-24 reported receiving threats of physical or sexual violence online



1 in 5 (21%) women reported experiencing online harms that are suggestive of coercive control, stalking, monitoring or harassment, rising to 30% of young women aged 16-24

Coercive control, stalking, monitoring and harassment

Online spaces are increasingly being used to facilitate coercive control, stalking, monitoring and harassment of women, including abuse through tracking, impersonation and repeated unwanted contact. ¹⁴

Our research found that 1 in 5 (21%) women in the UK have experienced online harms that are suggestive of these forms of abuse. This includes almost 1 in 16 (6%) women who reported they have been or have reason to believe they have been, stalked or monitored online, 1 in 20 (5%) women who reported receiving repeated abusive or threatening messages from the same account, 1 in 20 (5%) women who reported that someone has gained access to one or more of their social media accounts without consent, and 1 in 16 (6%) women who have been contacted by an account they have blocked or reported. In addition, 1 in 25 (4%) women reported that their location has been tracked online, and 1 in 25 (4%) reported that their personal information (including location, phone number or email address) has been shared publicly without their consent – also known as ‘doxing’.

our work with survivors, and existing studies, tell us that Black and minoritised women are at the sharp end of intersecting forms of online VAWG ¹³, and frequently resort to self-censorship in online spaces to protect themselves from harm. This could mean that the actual figures are higher than our findings suggest, indicating an urgent need for additional, targeted research into their experiences.

Almost 1 in 16 (6%) women reported they have been or have reason to believe they have been stalked or monitored online, rising to almost 1 in 10 (9%) young women aged 16-24.

¹³ Glitch, UK (2023) *The Digital Misogynoir Report: Ending the dehumanising of Black women on social media*.

¹⁴ Coercive control is a common form of domestic abuse. It may be facilitated through technology, including monitoring a survivor’s online communications and physical location, controlling access to online accounts, and sending unwanted messages.

1 in 25 (4%) women reported that they have been 'doxed' online, rising to almost 1 in 10 (9%) young women aged 16-24

Among young women aged 16-24, almost 1 in 3 (30%) reported experiencing online harms suggestive of coercive control, stalking, monitoring or harassment. This included almost 1 in 10 (9%) who reported they have been or have reason to believe they have been stalked or monitored online, while 1 in 12 (8%) women in this age bracket reported receiving repeated abusive or threatening messages from the same account, 9% disclosed that they have been contacted by an account they had blocked or reported, and 9% reported that their location has been tracked online. Concerningly, 9% of young women in this age group said that their personal information such as their location, phone number or email address has been shared publicly without their consent – also known as 'doxing'.

Our findings also suggest that LGBTQIA+ women are disproportionately impacted by online harms suggestive of coercive control, stalking, monitoring or harassment online, with 46% reporting that they had experienced some form of this. It also suggests that LGBTQIA+ women are more likely to experience specific online harms within this category, with 17% reporting that they have been or had reason to believe they have been stalked or monitored online and 16% reporting that they have received repeated abusive or threatening messages from the same account.

Image-based sexual abuse

Our research shows that image-based sexual abuse is a major feature of women's online experiences in the UK, with almost 1 in 5 (18%) women reporting that they have experienced some form of image-based sexual abuse, rising to almost 1 in 3 (31%) young women aged 16-24.

The most commonly experienced form of image-based sexual abuse was 'cyberflashing' (where someone receives a sexually explicit image of the sender without consent): 13% of women confirmed they had experienced cyberflashing, rising to 18% of young women aged 16-24.

We also found that 1 in 12 (8%) women reported receiving sexually explicit content, including pornographic content, without consent, rising to 14% of young women aged 16-24. Similarly, 1 in 14 (7%) young women aged 16-24 confirmed receiving threats that intimate images or videos of them would be shared without their consent, and 1 in 12 (8%) young women aged 16-24 reported that an intimate image or video of them has been non-consensually shared, so-called 'revenge porn' (compared to 3% of women overall).

1 in 20 (5%) young women aged 16-24 reported that they have had a 'deepfake' intimate image or video of them shared without their consent.

1 in 5 (18%) women reported that they have experienced some form of image-based sexual abuse, rising to almost 1 in 3 (31%) young women aged 16-24

Jane's story

Jane was informed by a friend that intimate photos of her were on an anonymous image-based board website, where users trade sexual and explicit images of women and girls without their consent, leaving derogatory comments. She is one of a group of women from the same area in the UK whose photos and videos were shared on the online image board. The images appear to have been obtained when some of the women's personal Facebook and Snapchat accounts were hacked in 2022. At the time, some of the women were aged under 18.*

The images are searchable by specific categories such as university residence hall, school, or local area, and are often uploaded together with identifying personal data including full names, schools, relatives and links to social media profiles. Jane's images were shared alongside her full name and were "grouped" in a thread with images of the other women whose images had been hacked, according to their location.

Since then, Jane and some of the other women have been approached on social media by men who they understand have seen the videos and photographs online. When Jane and the other survivors initially went to the police, they were of little help and even warned her off researching where her personal pictures may have been shared because they said that would put her at risk of breaking the law. Represented by law firm Leigh Day, Jane urged the regulator Ofcom to open a formal investigation into these platforms and to consider using its powers of investigation and enforcement. After Jane took the first step in legal proceedings with the intention of bringing a judicial review, Ofcom announced it had opened an investigation into the forum. The police also re-opened the criminal investigation after correspondence from Leigh Day.

**All survivors' names have been changed to protect their identity.*

Our research also suggests that women with certain protected characteristics are disproportionately experiencing image-based sexual abuse, including LGBTQIA+ women (42%) and Disabled women (24%). Notable within these findings was that LGBTQIA+ and Disabled women were more likely to report that they have experienced cyberflashing (29% and 18% respectively).

Crucially, we know that the proliferation of AI image-generation or 'deepfake' tools is driving new forms of online VAWG.¹⁵ Our research found that 1 in 50 (2%) women reported that they have personally experienced an AI-generated or 'deepfake' intimate image or video of them being shared without their consent, and the same number reported being threatened that such material would be shared; these numbers are likely to rise as this technology becomes more widely available.

Among young women aged 16-24, 1 in 20 (5%) reported that they have had a 'deepfake' intimate image or video of them shared without their consent, and 1 in 25 (4%) have been threatened that such material would be shared. Additionally, 1 in 14 (7%) young women aged 16-24 confirmed that they know a woman or women who have experienced deepfake intimate image abuse.

13% of women confirmed they had experienced cyberflashing, rising to 18% of young women aged 16-24.

¹⁵ See Bates, L. (2025) The New Age of Sexism: How the AI Revolution is Reinventing Misogyny

Jodie's story

In January 2021, Jodie* received an anonymous email directing her to images of herself shared online, alongside details of who she was and where she lived. A few weeks later, she found sexually explicit deepfakes of her on an online forum. Eventually, she discovered the perpetrator was her male best friend.

When Jodie reported this to the police, she was told there was nothing they could do and that it was up to the online forum and the porn site to remove the imagery. She had to track down the images and videos herself, gather evidence, and try to get them taken down - facing powerful tech platforms alone.

When she went back to the police with this evidence, they said the only charges they could bring related to foul language used online. No laws had been broken through the creation or sharing of the deepfakes, despite the devastating harm caused to Jodie and 15 other victims she had discovered. Jodie successfully campaigned for a new criminal offence covering the creation or sharing of non-consensual sexually explicit deepfakes, and continues to campaign for civil routes to justice.

Different kinds of online VAWG



Misogyny and sexual violence

Women overall



25%

Young women aged 16-24



38%

LGBTQIA+ women ¹⁶



57%



Coercive control, stalking, monitoring or harassment

Women overall



21%

Young women aged 16-24



30%

LGBTQIA+ women



46%



Image-based sexual abuse

Women overall



18%

Young women aged 16-24



31%

LGBTQIA+ women



42%

¹⁶ Findings relating to LGBTQIA+ women are indicative only; see methodology.

Perpetrators of online VAWG

Almost three quarters (72%) of women who experienced some form of online VAWG identified the perpetrator as male

Almost three quarters (72%) of women who experienced some form of online VAWG identified the perpetrator as male, while around 1 in 8 (13%) did not know the gender of the perpetrator.

The connections between women and the perpetrator(s) of the harm they experienced online were varied. Our research indicates two significant dynamics. First, women did not always know the perpetrators of the harm they experienced. Among women who experienced some form of online VAWG, the most commonly identified perpetrator was a stranger (53%). Additionally, 1 in 10 (9%) women who experienced some form of online VAWG identified a group of strangers as the perpetrators, which suggests that pile-ons and coordinated harassment of women play a significant role in women's experiences of online VAWG. This rose to 17% of Black and minoritised women who reported experiencing some form of online VAWG, suggesting they may be more likely to experience this form of harm.

Secondly, a significant number of women reported experiencing abuse or harassment from a current or former partner, with former partners the more commonly reported perpetrator of the two.

20% of women who reported experiencing online VAWG said it was perpetrated by a former partner

More than 1 in 5 women (22%) who experienced some form of online VAWG said their current or former partner was a perpetrator (including 20% who identified a former partner and 4% who identified a current partner). This rose to almost 1 in 3 (30%) young women who reported experiencing some form of online VAWG who said a current or former partner was a perpetrator (including 25% who identified a former partner and 9% who identified a current partner).

Women who reported experiencing online VAWG also said that it was perpetrated by friends and family (19%) and colleagues and classmates (10%), while others were not sure who the perpetrator was (3%).¹⁷

Together, these findings reinforce insight from previous research on online VAWG,¹⁸ and evidence from frontline services. Refuge's specialist tech-facilitated abuse service routinely supports survivors who are subjected to new or heightened forms of tech-facilitated abuse from their ex-partners following separation. This includes perpetrators contacting survivors from fake accounts, hacking their accounts to impersonate them, monitoring their communications and tracking their location, or recruiting third parties into coordinated campaigns of abuse and harassment towards survivors across online platforms, also known as 'proxy abuse'. The findings also suggest that online VAWG is an incredibly common form of abuse experienced by young women in the context of an intimate partner relationship and post-separation.

9% of women who reported experiencing online VAWG said that it was perpetrated by a group of strangers.

¹⁷ Respondents could select more than one perpetrator type.

¹⁸ Refuge (2021) *Unsocial Spaces*

Mary's story

Mary* left her perpetrator after many years of physical and emotional abuse. Following the separation, her ex-partner escalated his abuse, using technology to coerce and control her. He repeatedly harassed her and her family, threatened to take his own life unless she came home, and made repeated threats to share intimate images and videos of her without her consent and to upload them to porn sites. Her ex hacked her email account and was able to continuously change her passwords on her Facebook, Instagram, and Google accounts.

He impersonated her online, unblocking contacts she had previously blocked on social media and sending images and videos of her to them as though they were from her. This extended to sending non-consensual intimate videos to people within her networks, who notified her that this was happening.

Mary reported this to the platforms, with the hope of closing down her accounts, and reported it to the police, expecting her perpetrator would be arrested – neither of these outcomes happened.

It was not until she was referred to Refuge's tech-facilitated abuse service, who used their Trusted Flagger status with the social media platforms to escalate her case, that she was able to secure her accounts and remain online. With additional support from the Revenge Porn Helpline, she was able to get her non-consensual intimate images removed online and block them from being re-shared. Her perpetrator is still wanted by the police in relation to these offences but to date has not been arrested.

4

Algorithmic systems are normalising VAWG

Online VAWG is not only perpetrated by individuals or groups of users but also driven by how tech companies design their business models and platforms. Divisive content keeps people scrolling, increasing the time they spend on the platform and the potential revenue that tech companies can generate from advertising.¹⁹ Many online platforms operate algorithmic systems that recommend and amplify misogynistic content.²⁰

For example, a recent academic study on algorithmic recommender systems promoting male supremacist influencers found that it took 23 minutes for accounts identified as 16- or 18-year-old males to be fed toxic content, and 26 minutes to be fed manosphere content.²¹

Women and girls are not generally the target audience for this kind of content, and existing

¹⁹ Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, 'Oral evidence: Misogyny: the manosphere and online content'

²⁰ Regehr et al. (2024) *Safer Scrolling: How algorithms popularise and gamify online hate and misogyny for young people* [Joint report: UCL and University of Kent]

²¹ Baker, Ging and Brandt Andreassen (2024) *Recommending Toxicity: The role of algorithmic recommender functions on YouTube Shorts and TikTok in promoting male supremacist influencers* [Report: Dublin City University]



21% of young women aged 16-24 who use social media platforms reported encountering recommended content that is humiliating, degrading or sexually violent towards women most or every time they use the platform

research would suggest that exposure is likely much higher among men and boys. However, to understand women's experiences, we asked those who use social media platforms on a regular basis (at least once or twice a week) how frequently they encounter content recommended to them on their 'home' or 'discovery' pages that is humiliating, degrading or sexually violent towards women. 1 in 12 (8%) women reported encountering this content on their social media feeds most or every time they use the platform. This rose to 1 in 7 (14%) LGBTQIA+ women, 1 in 7 (14%) Black and minoritised women, and 1 in 5 (21%) young women aged 16-24.

Our findings also indicate that women want much greater control over the kind of content that is recommended to them than is currently available. Only around 1 in 5 (19%) women who regularly use an online platform are 'very satisfied' with the options available for customising the content they see on their feeds on the platforms they use most frequently.

Together, these findings are of significant concern because recommender systems that prioritise misogynistic and sexually violent content, combined with inadequate content moderation and reporting mechanisms, contribute to violence against women and girls. By promoting and normalising unhealthy, gender-regressive and

misogynistic views and behaviours, algorithmic systems discourage women's participation in online spaces, entrench gender inequality and drive patterns of gender-based harm and abuse both online and offline.

Research has shown that young people are increasingly reliant on social media for information about topics like pornography, relationships, their gender identity and sexual orientation,²² and has drawn clear links between rising levels of online abuse of women and girls, and toxicity in the classroom, with the growth of male supremacism online.²³ The role of social media platforms in subjecting users to algorithmically driven misogyny reinforces the need for quality relationship, sex and health education (RSHE) in schools and further education colleges, to counter the messages that young people are experiencing online.

²² Sex Education Forum (2024) *Young people turn to online sources for RSE information*

²³ Baker, Ging and Brandt Andreasen (2024) *Recommending Toxicity: The role of algorithmic recommender functions on YouTube Shorts and TikTok in promoting male supremacist influencers* [Report: Dublin City University]

AI: new ways to perpetrate VAWG

The rapid expansion and ubiquity of generative AI technologies is creating new pathways for VAWG, with regulation and research struggling to keep pace. Important research contributions have highlighted how AI tools, including AI chatbots – which are fast becoming a feature of everyday life – can drive and facilitate a range of harms affecting women and girls,²⁴ including generating image-based sexual abuse material, initiating unwanted sexual communications, providing tailored advice on how to perpetrate gender-based violence and abuse, simulating abusive roleplays and scenarios, and normalising misogynistic attitudes through their immersive and human-like qualities.²⁵

The public controversy surrounding the AI tool ‘Grok’ in early 2026 is a case in point, illustrating the scale of these risks: an estimated 3 million sexualised images were generated using the tool over an 11-day period.²⁶ This included an estimated 1.8 million sexually explicit, non-consensual images of women created in just 9 days.²⁷

The Government has taken steps to address some of the risks AI tools pose to users’ safety, including bringing AI chatbots within the scope of the Online Safety Act’s illegal content duties and banning nudification tools. However, while these measures are welcome, they reflect a reactive, piecemeal and overly narrow approach to regulating a rapidly evolving form of technology. These efforts are also comparatively swamped by the Government’s bolstering of AI expansion as part of its growth agenda, as demonstrated in its AI Opportunities

Action Plan and decisions such as upgrading the AI minister to the Cabinet. As AI subsequently becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life, there is an urgent need for a more comprehensive regulatory framework that addresses the full range of risks that generative AI poses to user safety, of which women’s safety and wellbeing should be front and centre.

44% of women reported using an AI chat system on a regular basis, rising to 80% of younger women aged 16-24 and 74% of Black and minoritised women.

Against this backdrop, we wanted to understand how women are using generative AI in their daily lives, how concerned they are about the risks AI technologies pose in the context of VAWG, and whether they believe the Government is doing enough to regulate these technologies effectively.

Women’s use and experiences of AI chatbots

Our research found that AI chatbots are already a mainstream technology for many women, with 44% of the women we surveyed using an AI chat system on a regular basis. Usage was considerably higher among young women aged 16-24 (80%) and Black and minoritised women (74%).

²⁴ See McGlynn, McDermott, MacDonald, Toparlak, Tarrant and Treacy (March 2026) *Invisible No More: How AI Chatbots Are Reshaping Violence Against Women and Girls* and Pickering (July 2026), *Weaponising Artificial Intelligence: The Misuse of AI Technologies by Perpetrators* [Report in partnership with WWP European Network]

²⁵ McGlynn, McDermott, MacDonald, Toparlak, Tarrant and Treacy (March 2026) *Invisible No More: How AI Chatbots Are Reshaping Violence Against Women and Girls*

²⁶ Centre for Countering Digital Hate (22 January 2026) *Grok floods X with sexualised images of women and children* *Grok floods X with sexualized images of women and children*

²⁷ Conger, K. Freedman, D. and Thompson. S. (22 January 2026) *Musk’s Chatbot Flooded X With Millions of Sexualized Images in Days, New Estimates Show*. The New York Times. Since then, Jess Asato MP has *launched legal action* against xAI to hold the company accountable for its role in the creation of non-consensual intimate images of her by users of its Grok tool. This is a significant development in the fight for greater tech accountability. The case at the High Court seeks damages and also aims to establish an important legal precedent: that technology companies can be held responsible for the design and foreseeable harms of the systems they create.

Around 1 in 10 (11%) women have used an AI chat system for advice on their mental health and wellbeing, 12% have used an AI chat system for advice on a difficult or stressful personal situation, 13% have used one for advice on their physical health and 5% for dating sex and relationships advice.

Overall, wider research suggests that women use AI at lower rates than men.²⁸ However, according to our research, women who do use AI chat systems reported using them for a range of reasons. A quarter (25%) of women reported using an AI chat system to create content, including drafting personal messages to send to someone via email, text or a dating app; experimenting with AI-generated images and videos; and drafting content to share on social media. Significant numbers are also turning to AI chat systems for advice on personal and sensitive matters. Around 1 in 10 (11%) women have used an AI chat system for advice on their mental health and wellbeing, 12% have used an AI chat system for advice on a difficult or stressful personal situation, and 13% have used one for advice on their physical health. A smaller, but notable number of women (5%) reported using an AI chat system for advice relating to dating, relationships or sex.

Young women aged 16-24 were generally twice as likely as women overall to use an AI chat system to create content and seek advice. Half (50%) reported having used an AI chat system to create content, including messages, social media posts, and AI-generated imagery; 25% have used an AI chat system for advice on their mental health and wellbeing, 26% have used one to get advice on a difficult or stressful personal situation, and 22% for advice on their physical health. Notably, 16% of young women aged 16-24 also reported having used an AI chat system for dating, relationships or sex advice.

17% of young women aged 16-24 reported having received dating, sex or relationship advice from an AI technology that could be considered inappropriate, unhealthy or unsafe in the context of women's safety and wellbeing

Our research also suggests that some women with protected characteristics may be more likely to use AI chat systems for advice on sensitive personal matters. Notably, 22% of LGBTQIA+ and 21% of Black and minoritised women we surveyed reported having used an AI chat system for advice on their mental health and wellbeing (compared to 11% of women overall), and 9% of LGBTQIA+ women and 11% of Black and minoritised women have used one for dating, relationships or sex advice (compared to 5% of women overall).

As AI chat systems are increasingly used by some women for personal advice, including relationships advice, the quality and safety of that advice become more pressing. Concerningly, 5% of women overall and around 1 in 6 (17%) of young women aged 16-24 reported that they have experienced an AI technology providing dating, sex or relationship advice that could be considered inappropriate, unhealthy or unsafe in the context of women's safety and wellbeing. Similarly, our research suggests women with protected characteristics are also more likely to report experiencing an AI technology providing inappropriate, unhealthy or unsafe dating, sex and relationships advice – with 9% of LGBTQIA+ women and 12% of Black and minoritised women reporting that this has happened to them.

²⁸ YouGov (September 2025) *How are UK students really using AI? How are UK students really using AI?* Cranney, Katelyn, Solène Delecourt, and Rembrand Koning. *Global Evidence on Gender Gaps and Generative AI Over Time*. Harvard Business School Working Paper, No. 25-023, October 2024. (Revised May 2026.)



66% of women are concerned about the role of AI technologies in enabling abuse and violence against women and girls

While alarming, these findings are not surprising considering research has shown that AI systems perpetuate existing gender and racial biases.²⁹ The experiences reported by women with protected characteristics in our research, combined with such biases, reinforce the urgent need for an intersectional and equalities-driven approach to the governance, design, and operation of AI technology.

66% of women are not confident that the Government is doing enough to regulate AI technology in the context of online VAWG and women and girls' online safety

Women's concerns around AI technologies and VAWG

Given the growing role that AI technology plays in women's everyday lives, it is perhaps unsurprising that many women are concerned about its potential to contribute to VAWG, and what the Government is doing to address this risk.

We asked the women we surveyed how concerned they are about the role of AI technologies in enabling abuse and violence against women and girls. Overall, two thirds (66%) of women reported being concerned, among which over 1 in 4 (28%) reported that they are 'very concerned'. Concern was higher among women who also told us that they have personally experienced some form of online VAWG – with 75% of these women indicating that they are concerned, of which 33% are 'very concerned'.

Critically, our research shows that women have little confidence in the Government's existing approach to regulating AI technology. Two thirds (66%) of women reported that they are not confident that the Government is doing enough to regulate AI technology in the context of online VAWG and women and girls' online safety. In contrast, just 15% of women reported that they are confident the Government is currently doing enough and 19% didn't know.

Taken together, these findings point to a significant gap between the role of AI technology in women's everyday lives, and women's confidence that effective safeguards are in place to ensure they are protected from the potential harms driven or perpetuated by this technology. These findings highlight the urgency of a stronger and more comprehensive approach to regulating AI.

²⁹ UN Women (22 June 2026) *AI is already rewriting reality for billions of people. It is getting women wrong*

The impact of online VAWG on women

Our research reveals the devastating effect of online VAWG on women's mental health and physical safety as well as their access to online spaces. Of the women who reported that they had experienced some form of online VAWG, 41% experienced anxiety as a result, 27% experienced loss of confidence or self-esteem and 11% reported feeling isolated as a result of their experience of online VAWG. Relatedly, 13% of women and 20% of young women aged 16-24 reported that they feared leaving the house as a result while 1 in 7 (14%) women experienced panic attacks, rising to 1 in 5 (21%) women aged 16-24. Sadly, but not surprisingly, 1 in 14 (7%) reported that the experience of online VAWG had made them feel suicidal – this doubled for young women, with 15% of women aged 16-24 reporting feeling suicidal as a result.

15% of young women aged 16-24 who reported having experienced online VAWG said the experience made them feel suicidal.

Additionally, our research found that 11% of LGBTQIA+ women and 12% of Black and minoritised women who reported experiencing some form of online VAWG felt suicidal as a result. Our findings also suggest that LGBTQIA+ women are more likely to experience anxiety (59%), panic attacks (23%) and isolation (25%) compared to women overall (41%, 14% and 11% respectively).

1 in 5 (21%) women who reported experiencing online VAWG did not tell anyone about it

1 in 7 (14%) women felt more at risk of physical violence because of their experience of online harm.

We found that, among women who reported experiencing some form of online VAWG, 1 in 5 (24%) reported feeling fear as a result and 1 in 7 (14%) women felt more at risk of physical violence because of their experience of online harm. This fear is well-founded, considering that women participating in this research reported receiving online threats of physical or sexual violence (6%), have been, or have reason to believe that they have been stalked (6%), or have experienced their personal information – including their location – being shared without their consent (4%). In domestic abuse contexts specifically, online abuse and harassment often overlaps with physical violence, and this can escalate when the relationship ends and women block or remove perpetrators from their accounts.

Our research also shows that experiencing online VAWG directly impacts women's access to online spaces. 1 in 5 (19%) women who experienced some form of online VAWG reported that the experience made them fear being online, which rose to 29% of LGBTQIA+ women. More than 1 in 5 (22%) women reduced commenting or posting online as a result, while 18% reduced their general use of the platform and 14% stopped using it altogether. Combined, over 1 in 3 (38%) women modified their use or access of online spaces after being abused, showing the widespread chilling effect that it has on women's freedom of expression and participation in public discourse, with concerning impacts for democracy.

Alarmingly, 1 in 5 (21%) women who experienced some form of online VAWG did not tell anyone about it (whether friends or family, their employer, school or university); did not report it (to the platform or police); and did not seek any kind of support. This demonstrates the number of women who experience online harm in silence, without disclosing it, formally reporting it, or accessing any form of specialist support.

The response to online VAWG

We asked what actions, if any, the women who said they experienced online VAWG took as a result. Most did not report to online platforms or the police, and when they did, they reported that the response they received was generally poor.

Platform responses are not working for women

Our research suggests that women's confidence in technology companies to respond appropriately to online harm is extremely low; fewer than 1 in 3 (29%) women who told us that they had experienced some form of online VAWG also said that they had reported it to the platform.

For those who did report to the platform, satisfaction with the handling of their report was low. Over half (58%) of women who reported were not satisfied with the outcome of the report, 54% were not satisfied with action taken against the perpetrator, such as suspending or banning them, and 59% were not satisfied with the level of support provided by the platform in relation to their safety, mental health and wellbeing. In addition, many women were not satisfied with how quickly the platform responded to their initial report (54%), or how quickly the content was removed, if necessary (48%).

14% of women who reported experiencing online VAWG stopped using the platform altogether as a result

Only 29% of women who said they experienced online VAWG reported it to the platform

These negative experiences of reporting reinforce frontline insights of online harm perpetrated in domestic abuse contexts. Refuge's tech-facilitated abuse service maintains 'Trusted Flagger' relationships with several mainstream social media platforms, meaning it can report content on behalf of survivors through dedicated pathways. Trusted Flagger relationships are an important safeguard, providing flaggers with the opportunity to add critical context to reports that would not be possible through standard reporting systems, and flagged reports can sometimes speed up platforms' responses.

However, outcomes are mixed. In Refuge's experience, online platforms' Trust and Safety teams do not always understand the dynamics of controlling and coercive behaviour and can be overly focused on whether individual pieces of content violate community guidelines, rather than assessing patterns of behaviour that may spread across multiple pieces of content, different platforms, and overlap with offline behaviours. This poses challenges for survivors who are left to gather evidence independently. Meanwhile, the specialist services advocating with platforms to achieve positive outcomes for survivors of online VAWG urgently require ring-fenced, long-term funding to ensure they can meet high demand for their support.

Our findings showed that the most common reasons for not reporting online harm to the platform were that women didn't think it would



Nikita's story

Nikita split from her perpetrator, who then subjected her to various forms of tech-facilitated abuse, including constantly harassing her through calls, messages and social media. He hacked her email account and was then able to hack her social media accounts, where he impersonated her, changed her security details, and then deactivated her account so she was unable to access it or use the in-platform reporting tools. He also shared images and videos of her without consent on his own social media accounts as a form of coercive control and threatened to share intimate images and videos of her with men that she knew unless she spoke to him. Her perpetrator was known to the police and had been arrested for stalking her and threatening to share her intimate images.*

One of Nikita's friends showed her abusive posts the perpetrator had made about her on his own social media account. When she reported it to the platform, they told her they required URL addresses to review the posts

and assess them against their community guidelines, but these were inaccessible to Nikita due to the perpetrator having made his profile private. Refuge's tech-facilitated abuse service used its Trusted Flagger relationship with the platform to support Nikita in making further reports, highlighting the police involvement in her case and the domestic abuse context. URL addresses were again requested, and the platform would not accept screenshots of the perpetrator's username to initiate an investigation. It was not safe for Nikita to ask friends or family to help her gather this evidence in case the perpetrator found out and escalated the abuse. She felt let down by the platform's response, and despite advocacy support from Refuge, the Trust and Safety team did not understand the dynamics of the abuse she was experiencing, which formed part of a wider pattern of coercive control, and did not take appropriate action. Some of the content that was reported by Nikita has still not been taken down by the platform.

be taken seriously by the platform (37%) or that they didn't trust that the platform would take action (26%). Other reasons that women gave for not reporting the abuse to the platform included not wanting to explain their experience (20%), the reporting system being too complex (10%), prior negative experience of reporting (10%) or fearing reprisals if the platform took action against the perpetrator (7%).

Over half (58%) of women who reported online VAWG to the platform were not satisfied with the outcome of the report.

Together, these negative perceptions and experiences among women who reported experiencing online VAWG reinforce the wider finding from our research that only 53% of women who regularly use online platforms are

satisfied with the options available on their most frequently used platform to report harassment or abusive content, compared to 18% who are not satisfied and 29% who didn't know. This demonstrates a clear need for tech companies to design more accessible, trauma-informed and effective reporting systems for women who face disproportionate risks of harm on their services.

The most common reasons for women not reporting the online VAWG they had experienced were that they did not think the platform would take it seriously or trust the platform to take action

The police response to online VAWG and alternative routes to redress

A large proportion of online VAWG occurring on social media, dating and gaming platforms is illegal. This includes online harassment, controlling and coercive behaviour, stalking, cyberflashing, non-consensual sharing of intimate images/videos, and threats to share intimate images/videos.

Furthermore, as a result of VAWG sector and survivor campaigning efforts, the criminal law has expanded further to reflect new and emerging forms of image-based sexual abuse. Earlier this year, a new criminal offence came into force of creating or requesting the creation of sexually explicit AI-generated ('deepfake') images/videos without consent,³⁰ and a new offence of non-consensually sharing an image of someone where generative AI has been used to deface the image with 'semen' has also passed into law.³¹

Despite such legislative change, we know that the police response to online VAWG is often ineffective. It is not uncommon for police to advise women to adapt their own behaviour when they experience online abuse and harassment. The suggestion that online harm is confined to online spaces and can be dealt with by closing an account, deleting an app, or simply coming offline altogether fails to recognise the overlap between online VAWG and other forms of offline abuse, including domestic abuse and stalking, where blocking or otherwise preventing a perpetrator from contacting survivors online can heighten risks to their safety.

Only 12% of women who said they experienced online VAWG reported it to the police

72% of women think civil law orders should be available for survivors of image-based sexual abuse to seek redress beyond the criminal justice system

Our research confirms that women's confidence in reporting online VAWG to the police is low. Only 1 in 8 (12%) women we surveyed who disclosed that they had experienced some form of online VAWG reported it to the police, with no significant disparity in reporting according to the type of harm they experienced. For women who did report to the police, 17% said their case was not investigated at all. Where cases were investigated, women reported relatively low rates of satisfaction with police action in relation to the handling and outcomes of their cases. Around 1 in 3 women who reported to the police were not satisfied with the police's investigation (33%), evidence gathering (31%), and the information provided to them about the progress of their case (37%). In addition, many women reported that they were not satisfied with police action either to protect them from the perpetrator (30%), or to bring charges against them (29%).

When online VAWG is not addressed, perpetrators can avoid consequences and accountability, meaning they are able to continue harming women. We know that the investigation, evidence-gathering and prosecution for online VAWG offences is inadequate. By way of example, recent FOI research conducted by Refuge revealed that just 4.5% of police-recorded intimate image offences in England and Wales resulted in a charge in 2024/25.³²

³⁰ Data (Use and Access) Act 2025

³¹ Crime and Policing Act 2026

³² Refuge (April 2026) *Refuge data reveals rise in intimate image abuse reports while charging rates decline*



Given the failings of the criminal justice system to provide justice and safety for survivors of VAWG, especially for the most marginalised, we wanted to understand more about survivors' perspectives on alternative routes to redress beyond the criminal justice system. Asking specifically about civil redress for image-based sexual abuse, we found that almost three quarters (72%) of the 2,000 women we surveyed believe that civil law orders should be available to survivors, including civil law orders to recover damages; require perpetrators to delete the material; require online platforms to take down or disable access to the online content; and require internet service providers to block access to both the content and non-compliant platforms. This finding demonstrates that the lack of civil redress options for survivors of image-based sexual abuse is a major gap in the current response to online VAWG.

The police and wider criminal justice system also have a crucial role to play in tackling online VAWG. When women experience online VAWG offences, it is vital they are able to report it safely and that police and prosecutors handle their cases sensitively and effectively. Women must also be supported throughout the criminal justice process, with perpetrators held to account under law. To achieve this, there is an urgent need for the criminal justice system to improve the response to online VAWG crimes and ensure women who wish to pursue criminal justice get the outcomes they deserve. This must include mandatory, trauma-informed training for police and prosecutors on online VAWG offences, which embeds understanding of how these offences may intersect with wider forms of VAWG, including domestic abuse.

Our research also makes clear that women want and need additional routes to redress for online image-based sexual abuse beyond the criminal law. We urge the Government to improve civil laws for survivors to take action against perpetrators and tech companies, in line with campaign asks from a coalition of survivors, academics and civil society organisations.³³

Around 1 in 3 women who reported to the police were not satisfied with the police's investigation (33%), evidence gathering (31%), and the information provided to them about the progress of their case (37%).

³³ *Stop Image-based Abuse*, in partnership with Glamour, #NotYourPorn, EVAW and Professor Clare McGlynn (2024)

Refuge and EAW would like to thank the survivors whose stories are cited in this report, and the following organisations: Opinium and Ginger and Tall.

Refuge

Charity number: 277424

Company number: 1412276

Regulator of Social Housing number: 4730

Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline is available on 0808 2000 247 for free, confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. A live chat service is also available from 10am to 10pm, Monday to Friday, and from 10am to 6pm on weekends.

www.refuge.org.uk

www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk

refugetechsafety.org



End Violence Against Women Coalition

Charity number: 1161132

www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk

