



The scourge of online misogyny and racism fuels calls for regulation

## Description

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Misogyny online is fuelling misogyny offline

A recent report by [children's charity Barnardo's](#) lays bare the scale of misogyny in the UK. Polling 4,000 young people, it shows how misogyny and targeted racism have flourished on social media platforms. As a result, the report found that these attitudes have dangerously become more "commonplace" among offline.

Against this backdrop, British PM Keir Starmer announced yesterday a social media ban will come into effect next year, restricting access for under-16s. Nevertheless, will still be able to [circumvent](#) the ban using VPNs. This means use of Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and X, by young people will likely continue.

[Lauren Spiers of Barnardo's Northern Ireland](#) informed:

Girls tell us misogyny is difficult to escape. It shows up in classrooms, corridors, on buses and online and it's often normalised or unchallenged.

This suggests the ban is unlikely to improve the safety of girls and young women, and risks emboldening abuse offline. For Black and Brown girls, ["misogynoir"](#) – the intersection of racism and misogyny – makes the threat even greater.

## Misogyny and dehumanising racism

*Barnardo's* produced this powerful report after becoming alarmed by the growing number of young people harmed by the normalisation of misogyny online, with some girls experiencing abuse from as

young as 13.

Polling 4,000 young people, the charity found that misogynistic abuse and harassment have become “constant, corrosive and deeply embedded” in the lives of many children across the UK.

Moreover, misogyny doesn’t just harm girls – it also pressures boys into unhealthy and restrictive ideas of masculinity. Nearly six in ten boys reported feeling compelled to “act tough” and hide their emotions. Meanwhile, a quarter of girls said they had been called degrading names online.

For some girls, that painful abuse goes even further. Those who do not fit narrow Western beauty ideals, such as young girls of colour, can find themselves subjected not only to misogyny, but also racism and dehumanising language.

As a result, this toxic culture actively harms young people, damaging confidence, poisoning relationships and undermining self-worth, while subjecting marginalised groups to even greater abuse.

Samai, a 21-year-old Black student who took part in *Barnardo’s* Changing Attitudes focus group, talks about being labelled “masculine” simply for being Black, stating:

“There’s a lot of cases where famous Black people get accused of being trans. That’s a huge, huge thing online. For example, a lot of people are trying to prove that Michelle Obama is transgender, and Megan Thee Stallion too.”

It happens with sports players as well, Serena Williams is always being told that she’s masculine or a man.

What does that mean for young Black girls who are seeing that online? This shows how features associated with Black women are seen as being masculine.

## Hiding misogyny behind “banter”

Young boys are increasingly absorbing misogynistic attitudes online, where influencers, algorithms and peer pressure normalise abusive and demeaning rhetoric towards girls. As a result, many come to see this behaviour as acceptable, or even expected.

The starkest finding is that 57% of boys surveyed felt pressure to join misogynistic “banter” or risk being labelled “boring.” This is not harmless joking, but a culture teaching boys that sexism earns social approval.

The reality is bleak – the more sexism is normalised, the less safe girls feel. What some dismiss as “banter” can have real consequences, and for many women it is often the start of something worse.

Meanwhile, 21% of boys said they felt unable to challenge sexist comments from friends, showing how entrenched these attitudes have become. When peer pressure silences boys, misogyny doesn’t just survive – it spreads.

Olly, aged 18, told *Barnardo's*:

As a young man, I see online misogyny every day. It sets the tone for how boys treat girls and how boys treat each other. There is pressure to laugh it off or stay silent, even when it crosses a line.

Young men set the standard. Challenge it, shut it down, and back those who speak up. That is how we change what is accepted.

Children's Services Manager for *Barnardo's* South West England, Sarah [stated](#)

We've supported young girls who have had digitally manipulated (deepfake) images of them created and circulated online.

The images were shared through social media platforms, sometimes via fake accounts created to spread the images further. Incidents like this cause significant emotional impact including fear and distress.

A culture of victim blaming can also lead to girls being concerned about how others perceive them, rather than seeing themselves as a victim of sexual abuse. This can sometimes leave them vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation – but with the right support, we do see girls begin to rebuild trust, confidence and find their voice.

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## Men must call out misogyny

*Barnardo's* wants urgent action to tackle misogyny wherever it occurs, put children's voices at the centre of decision-making, and make online spaces genuinely safe for young people. To achieve this, the charity is calling on the Government to give Ofcom's Violence Against Women and Girls guidance real teeth by making it a mandatory Code of Practice and holding platforms accountable for the harms they enable.

Misogyny and [violence against women and girls](#) remain [a serious crisis](#) across Western society, particularly in the UK. Too often, women stay silent because society puts victims on trial. Meanwhile, perpetrators escape accountability.

The fact that this problem is getting worse, not better, should ring alarm bells. The girls of today will become the women of tomorrow. Furthermore, boys exposed to misogynistic attitudes risk carrying those behaviours into adulthood.

Simply banning social media will not make these problems disappear. If anything, it risks driving abuse further underground, making some girls less likely to speak out if they fear punishment for using prohibited platforms. What young people – [and many adults](#) – need is far greater state investment in relationship education, digital literacy, and healthy communication, so they can actually understand

what constitutes respectful behaviour.

We already know where [misogyny, entitlement](#) and [the abuse of power can lead](#) The testimonies of countless survivors make that painfully clear.

Importantly, the next generation deserves better than to inherit the same harmful attitudes and behaviours that have damaged so many lives before them.

Featured image [via Barnardo's](#)

By [Maddison Wheeldon](#)

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