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Public Accounts Committee

Response to the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) inquiry

**Dr. Ksenia Bakina, Iona Black, Dr. Keely Duddin, Professor Olga Jurasz on behalf of
the Centre for Protecting Women Online.**

The Centre for Protecting Women Online¹ is a vehicle for understanding and addressing challenges posed to women's online safety through a novel, interdisciplinary and ambitious research agenda. It develops cross-sectoral, collaborative outputs and interventions which inform law, policy, technology development and practice to reduce online harms suffered by women and girls; minimise anti-social behaviours online whilst promoting pro-social behaviours and help build tech/software that helps ensure accountability, credibility and helps facilitate justice.

The Centre is comprised of five interwoven work streams:

- Law & Policy,
- Human Behaviour,
- The Future of Responsible Tech,
- Ethical and Responsible Tech/AI and
- Policing.

Additionally, the Centre has partnered with numerous organisations to help achieve its core objectives.²

We are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to Public Accounts Committee inquiry in relation to tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG). Should you require further information we would be happy to assist you by providing oral evidence and engaging in further policy development.

¹ *The Centre for Protecting Women Online*, (2024) available at: <https://university.open.ac.uk/centres/protecting-women-online/#:~:text=About%20the%20Centre,interdisciplinary%20and%20ambitious%20research%20agenda>

² 'Partnerships' (*The Centre for Protecting Women Online*) available at: <https://university.open.ac.uk/centres/protecting-women-online/partnerships>

Summary

This submission of evidence highlights the urgent need to effectively address online harms experienced by women and girls within any strategy tackling violence against women and girls. Further, it explains the widespread nature of online violence against women (OVAWG), highlighting relevant statistics obtained from a first UK-wide study on online violence. The submission also addresses the current gaps and challenges in tackling OVAWG in the UK in relation to law and policy development and policing practice. This submission concludes by providing a list of key actionable recommendations that need to be addressed and implemented by government to ensure that OVAWG is tackled effectively, reflecting victims' and survivors' lived experiences.

Importance of tackling online violence against women (OVAWG)

A Parliamentary inquiry on violence against women and girls (VAWG) must pay particular attention to online harms experienced by women and girls. Many forms of VAWG, facilitated through online platforms.³ The online environment makes it easier for perpetrators of VAWG to harass, stalk and abuse victims, as it allows for a global reach, online anonymity, and provides an outlet of misogynistic views.⁴ Technology is often utilised to negate typical physical boundaries of offline violence and a single act of OVAWG can spread across large geographic areas whilst impacting more than one victim at a time.

Despite the prevalence of online harms in recent years and steady increase in law and policy responses to this phenomenon (e.g. Online Safety Act 2023; EU AI Act 2024; EU Digital Services Act 2022), there is still a limited understanding of their full spectrum and impact.⁵ A lack of knowledge on different harms and how to report them will contribute to this. However, the Four Nation Study, conducted by Olga Jurasz, found

³ 'What Is Online Violence?' (*Amnesty International*, 6 December 2024) available at: [https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/technology/online-](https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/technology/online-violence/#:~:text=Black%20women%20were%20disproportionately%20targeted,as%20such%20under%20international%20law)

[violence/#:~:text=Black%20women%20were%20disproportionately%20targeted,as%20such%20under%20international%20law](https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAWG%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf)
⁴ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations Study Survey Report' (The Open University, 2024) Page 16 available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAWG%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

⁵ K. Barker, O. Jurasz, 'Gender-based abuse online: An assessment of law, policy and reform in England and Wales' in A Powell, A Flynn, L Sugiura (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook on Gendered Violence and Technology* (2021, Palgrave) 529-544

that women who experienced online violence reported it to platform providers but not to the police.⁶

This negatively affects prevention of online harms and access to justice for its victims. This is particularly the case with online harms experienced by women which are often narrowly understood to include sexual harms and largely exclude other types of harms – e.g. text-based abuse, online harassment and cyberstalking. Such approach is not only misguided and not reflective of lived experiences of women online⁷ but results in **fragmented, incoherent responses** which do little to i) change the behaviours which lead to online harms; ii) **change the design of tech / software which enables online harms** and iii) provide effective law & policy responses which help the victims.

The Four Nation Study examined the scale, impact and societal attitudes towards online violence against women and girls (OVAWG) across the UK. It found that 1 in 4 women in England experience OVAWG and 1 in 3 LGB+ women experience online violence. Similarly, in Scotland 1 in 3 young women (aged under 34) experienced OVAWG. Whilst 1 in 2 LGB+ identifying women in Scotland had experienced OVAWG. Most of the incidents surveyed were of text-based abuse and sexually explicit. In Wales, 1 in 3 young women experienced online violence. 1 in 3 LGB+ identifying women had experienced online violence. Young women also more commonly experience sexually explicit online violence. In Northern Ireland only 12% of women experienced online violence, however, young women and LGB+ were more likely to be affected by it. This study found that in the United Kingdom, across the four nations, one in 10 women (15%) have experienced online violence, while 3 in 10 women (30%) have witnessed online violence. The study also found that most incidents of online violence that women experienced in the 12 months preceding the survey were text-based (82%) while approximately a third were image-based (33%). About half of all incidents in that period were not sexually explicit (45%) and they were committed by someone the woman did not know (81%). Women are most likely to experience online violence on Facebook (40%), Instagram (28%) and X/Twitter (33%).⁸

⁶ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations Study Survey Report' (The Open University, 2024) page 17 available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%20N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

⁷ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%20N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

⁸ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) Page 38 available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%20N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

Gaps in addressing OVAWG

Despite some developments in law and policy on OVAWG in the UK, we are only scraping the surface of understanding and addressing this global phenomenon which has real, global and local OVAWG – including the impact on mental health; the silencing effects; the decreased ability to participate in public and political life; and, in case of many women journalists and human rights defenders, hate, threats of extreme physical violence and death, defamation, disinformation (to name but a few) – are truly chilling. Most importantly, inadequate, fragmented and partial responses to OVAWG not only exacerbate its impacts and delay access to justice and redress for women and girls who suffered online violence – they also enable normalisation of these forms of violence against women in everyday life.⁹

There is a lack of systematically collated data on OVAWG, especially large-scale studies. Whilst there have been several empirical studies, these tend to focus on selected types of online violence (e.g. image-based sexual abuse), particular context (e.g. violence against women in politics) or location (e.g. only England rather than all four nations in the UK), allowing a valuable but only partial insight into the problem. These data gaps stand in the way of fully understanding the phenomenon of OVAWG and bringing forward a meaningful, coherent, evidence-based, and cross-sectoral set of responses to the multi-layered challenges posed by it.¹⁰ This is especially acute when considered through an intersectional lens, where factors such as race, sexual orientation and disability intersect with gender to create distinctive vulnerabilities. This makes it more difficult to develop effective legislative measures, policy, preventions and strategies but also further marginalises more vulnerable women and girls.

The government needs to allocate **more funding for large-scale research** which is required in relation to OVAWG before effective policy measures and prevention mechanisms are devised. The importance of collection of large-scale data in relation to OVAWG also needs to be emphasised in future governmental strategies. Otherwise, any response developed by the government will not be reflective of lived experiences of women online.

⁹ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) Page 13 available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

¹⁰ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) Page 12 available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

This is further exacerbated by the linguistic fragmentation in the field of OVAWG whereby “discourses and approaches to abusive behaviour online and harms perpetrated via technology are marked by terms that are used interchangeably or inaccurately, creating a fragmentation that is reinforced by the diversity of aims and perspectives of the different stakeholders that are currently shaping the narrative”.¹¹ This, in turn, leads to a failure to capture the full extent of harms arising from specific and distinct acts of online violence which, by extension, has impact on women and, in the legal context, the available avenues of redress.¹²

We encourage the government to **develop guidance that creates coherent terminology** in relation to OVAWG, capturing the full extent of harms and providing stronger protections and avenues for redress to victims. We would be happy to support development of such guidance.

Key issues with the current OVAWG legislative framework

The Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA 2023) addresses online harms such as image based sexual abuse and other communications offences and requires online platforms to prevent and remove any harmful material relating to OVAWG. However, the Online Safety Act 2023 has been criticised for failing to provide any enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the online platforms comply with requirements to prevent and remove harmful content. It only requires a UK regulator, Ofcom, to provide guidelines for best practices which are unlikely to have enough legal force to be respected.

Also, the Online Safety Act 2023 did not compel search engines like Google to de-rank harmful and violating sites and make them far less accessible. This is despite Google being the single largest driver of traffic to deepfake porn websites, and so laws that

¹¹ Council of Europe. Paragraph 28, GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women adopted on 20 October 2021, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-rec-no-on-digital-violence-againstwomen/1680a49147>; O. Jurasz, K. Barker, ‘Online text-based (sexual) abuse’ in P Ali and M Rogers (eds.), *Gender-Based Violence: A Comprehensive Guide* (Springer, 2023) 541- 554; K Barker, O. Jurasz, “Text-based (sexual) abuse and online violence against women: towards law reform?” In *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*, eds. Jane Bailey, Nicola Henry, and Asher Flynn, (Emerald Publishing, 2021) 247-264.

¹² K Barker, O. Jurasz, “Text-based (sexual) abuse and online violence against women: towards law reform?” In *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*, eds. Jane Bailey, Nicola Henry, and Asher Flynn, (Emerald Publishing, 2021) 247-264. O. Jurasz, K. Barker, ‘Online text-based (sexual) abuse’ in P Ali and M Rogers (eds.), *Gender-Based Violence: A Comprehensive Guide* (Springer, 2023) 541- 554

demand the company tweak its ranking system would have a huge effect on the accessibility of harmful content.¹³

The OSA 2023 also fails to capture women and girls' experiences online and does not provide protective measures, less so for minority groups which are more at risk of being targeted by perpetrators. As stated in the Tackling VAWG Strategy 2021¹⁴, young people, disabled people and those identifying as LGB+ are more likely to be victims of harassment, stalking and domestic violence. These findings are similar to those found in the study conducted by Olga Jurasz¹⁵, with young people being the least safe online and LGB+ women being more likely than heterosexual women to be subjected to online abuse.¹⁶ The OSA 2023 needs to incorporate and **acknowledge the prevalence of OVAWG beyond just image-based sexual abuse**. The focus needs to shift to text-based abuse and the intersectional impact that this can have on the reality of victims' lives.

Another key problem in tackling OVAWG is that **the legal responses, have been largely fragmented**¹⁷ typically prioritising certain forms of online violence (such as image-based sexual abuse) over others (e.g. text-based abuse). Legislative responses to date also lack recognition and protection of intersectional online harms. The use of technological advancements for harassment and exploitation online is not adequately regulated by current legislation in the UK. The laws need to adequately **capture the full spectrum of harms** arising online, from image based sexual abuse, text-based abuse, cyberstalking and harassment among others, including social and cultural harms (such as normalisation of violence against women and promotion of gender stereotypes undermining women).¹⁸

¹³ D'Anastasio C and Alba D, 'Google, Microsoft Tools behind Surge in Deepfake Ai Porn' (*Bloomberg.com*, 24 August 2023) available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-24/google-microsoft-tools-behind-surge-in-deepfake-ai-porn>

¹⁴ Tackling violence against women and girls, (2021) Page 24 available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6194d05bd3bf7f054f43e011/Tackling_Violence_Against_Women_and_Girls_Strategy_-_July_2021.pdf

¹⁵ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAWG%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

¹⁶ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) page 18 available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAWG%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

¹⁷ K. Barker, O Jurasz, 'Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe' (2020) 1 *European Equality Law Review* 47- 60

¹⁸ K. Barker, O. Jurasz, O. "Text-based (sexual) abuse and online violence against women: towards law reform?" In *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*, eds. Jane Bailey, Nicola Henry, and Asher Flynn, (Emerald Publishing, 2021) 247-264

Any legal measures addressing OVAWG need to be flexible enough to **withstand any future technological developments** and new ways of abuse as well as reflect lived experiences of women. Further, any legal measures tackling online harms must include effective mechanisms to ensure that platforms and apps that host this harmful content are required to adopt preventive measures and remove it. Further, such measures must be able to **deal with the global nature of OVAWG**. When perpetrators reside in countries with insufficient or different legal framework concerning OVAWG, mechanisms for enforcement and cooperation should be put in place.¹⁹ This lack of proper process hinders support and justice for victims alongside creating a feeling of safety for perpetrators to continue online abuse. Having comprehensive legislation and strengthening international cooperation on these issues globally is essential in combatting the growing rise of OVAWG.

Challenges of tackling OVAWG in policing

Policing in England and Wales faces significant structural, operational, and capability challenges in responding effectively to online violence against women and girls (OVAWG). While strides have been made in recognising VAWG as a strategic priority, the response remains fragmented, and substantial gaps persist in intelligence-sharing, digital investigation, and victim engagement²⁰

A key issue is the lack of a national operating model for OVAWG. Unlike other national threat areas such as Counter Terrorism (CT), and Serious and Organised Crime (SOC), there is no structured, intelligence-led national policing framework for OVAWG. It has been highlighted²¹ that the absence of a coordinated approach has led to inconsistent investigative responses across forces, disparities in training, and a lack of strategic prioritisation. The VKPP Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment 2024 further confirms

¹⁹ 'Accelerating Efforts to Tackle Online and Technology Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)' (UN Women, 2022) Page 10 available at: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Accelerating-efforts-to-tackle-online-and-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-en_0.pdf; Tackling Cyber Violence against women and girls: The role of digital platforms' (The European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024) available at https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/tackling-cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls-role-digital-platforms?language_content_entity=en

²⁰ Centre for Protecting Women Online (CPWO), 'Policing Technology-Facilitated and Online Violence Against Women: Landscape Review' (Unpublished report, 2025); National Audit Office (NAO), 'Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (2025)' Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls.pdf>

²¹ Centre for Protecting Women Online (CPWO), 'Policing Technology-Facilitated and Online Violence Against Women: Landscape Review' (Unpublished report, 2025).

that OVAWG remains significantly underreported and has not been fully integrated into national policing strategies.²²

The issue of underreporting and lack of victim confidence in policing responses further compounds these challenges. Research shows that victims of OVAWG are often reluctant to report incidents to the police. Jurasz identifies lack of confidence in police responses as a key barrier.²³ The Victims' Commissioner found that only 13% of victims of online abuse were satisfied with the police response, while 45% were advised to remove themselves from online spaces rather than being offered meaningful intervention.²⁴

A key challenge in policing OVAWG is the lack of specialist digital investigation skills and forensic capacity. The CPWO Landscape Review discusses the limitations in police digital forensic capabilities and the impact of forensic backlogs on investigations, with delays reducing victims' access to justice. The VKPP report identifies inconsistencies in how digital elements of crimes are assessed within investigations, contributing to missed opportunities to gather evidence and safeguard victims.²⁵

While coercive control and stalking are recognised as high-risk behaviours, there are significant gaps in how policing identifies and responds to the digital elements of these offences. It has been highlighted that policing responses remain predominantly geared towards offline crime, meaning that online and technology-facilitated elements are often overlooked in risk assessments and investigations.²⁶ The HMICFRS/IOPC 2024 report on stalking found that police responses frequently fail to consider digital evidence, leading to missed opportunities to identify high-risk offenders and safeguard victims.²⁷

²² Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) – Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), 'VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment' (2024) Available at: <https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Uploads/VAWG-Strategic-Threat-and-Risk-Assessment-underpinning-and-informing-the-2024-VAWG-Statement-v2.pdf>

²³ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) page 19, available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>

²⁴ K. Storry and S Poppleton 'Hearing the Victims' Voice: Online Abuse and the Criminal Justice System. Available' (Victims' Commissioner 2022). at: <https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/6/2022/05/Hearing-the-Victims-Voice.pdf>

²⁵ Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) – Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), 'VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment' (2024) Available at: <https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Uploads/VAWG-Strategic-Threat-and-Risk-Assessment-underpinning-and-informing-the-2024-VAWG-Statement-v2.pdf>

²⁶ Centre for Protecting Women Online (CPWO), 'Policing Technology-Facilitated and Online Violence Against Women: Landscape Review' (Unpublished report, 2025); National Audit Office (NAO), 'Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (2025)' Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls.pdf>

²⁷ HMICFRS/IOPC, Police Response to Stalking: Joint Inspection Report in Response to the Super-Complaint (2024). available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/police-response-to-stalking/>

Another core challenge is the lack of intelligence-sharing between police, technology companies, and specialist support services. The CPWO Landscape Review states that there is no formal mechanism for systematic reporting and data exchange between online platforms and law enforcement, making it difficult for police to build an accurate threat picture of OVAWG.²⁸ The VKPP 2024 report similarly highlights gaps in data collection and intelligence-sharing across agencies, which limit policing's ability to track emerging threats and offender behaviours.²⁹

Public and policing awareness of OVAWG remains low. Research shows that many victims do not report tech-facilitated abuse simply because they do not recognise it as a crime or are unclear on how to report it.³⁰ The VKPP 2024 Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment found that many frontline officers lack awareness of OVAWG offences, limiting their ability to take proactive action and provide appropriate victim support.³¹

Addressing these challenges in policing

To ensure that policing can effectively respond to OVAWG, a **structured, intelligence-led, and capability-focused approach** must be adopted—one that is rooted in the lived experiences of victims and survivors. Therefore, any improvements to the policing response must be informed by survivor voices, centring their needs, experiences, and the barriers they face in seeking justice.

There is currently no structured, intelligence-led national policing framework for OVAWG. This absence has led to inconsistent responses across forces, disparities in training, and limited strategic prioritisation.³² A national operating model, should be developed to ensure that all forces follow clear investigative protocols, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and victim-centred safeguarding approaches. The VAWG

²⁸ Centre for Protecting Women Online (CPWO), 'Policing Technology-Facilitated and Online Violence Against Women: Landscape Review' (Unpublished report, 2025)

²⁹ Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) – Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), 'VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment' (2024) Available at: <https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Uploads/VAWG-Strategic-Threat-and-Risk-Assessment-underpinning-and-informing-the-2024-VAWG-Statement-v2.pdf>

³⁰ Centre for Protecting Women Online (CPWO), 'Policing Technology-Facilitated and Online Violence Against Women: Landscape Review' (Unpublished report, 2025).

³¹ Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) – Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), 'VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment' (2024) Available at: <https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Uploads/VAWG-Strategic-Threat-and-Risk-Assessment-underpinning-and-informing-the-2024-VAWG-Statement-v2.pdf>

³² Centre for Protecting Women Online (CPWO), 'Policing Technology-Facilitated and Online Violence Against Women: Landscape Review' (Unpublished report, 2025); National Audit Office (NAO), 'Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (2025)' Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls.pdf>.

Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment highlights the need for a more coordinated approach.³³

Second, **investment in digital investigation capabilities** is critical. Many survivors report that officers lack the knowledge and resources to investigate online abuse, leaving them without protection or legal recourse.³⁴ **Appropriate and effective trauma informed training** must be made mandatory across all forces, ensuring that all frontline officers can effectively identify, document, and investigate OVAWG cases.

Third, **reporting mechanisms and intelligence-sharing between police, online platforms, and support services** must be strengthened. A formal process for reporting tech-facilitated abuse incidents from online platforms to law enforcement should be established. This will provide a clearer picture of offender behaviour and emerging threats. Similarly, inconsistencies in how police categorise and flag digital elements within OVAWG cases hinder data collection and strategic threat assessment. The VAWG STRA recommends improving the standardisation of digital evidence recording across forces to ensure TFVAWG cases are accurately tracked.³⁵

While coercive control and stalking are recognised as high-risk behaviours, policing strategies do not always integrate digital elements into investigations. The HMICFRS report on stalking found that police responses frequently fail to consider digital evidence, leading to missed opportunities to identify high-risk offenders and safeguard victims.³⁶ The CPWO Landscape Review similarly highlights that policing remains predominantly geared towards offline crime, meaning that online and technology-facilitated elements are often overlooked in risk assessments and investigations.³⁷

³³ Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) – Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), ‘VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment’ (2024) Available at: <https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Uploads/VAWG-Strategic-Threat-and-Risk-Assessment-underpinning-and-informing-the-2024-VAWG-Statement-v2.pdf>

³⁴ O. Jurasz, ‘Online violence against women: A Four Nations study’ (The Open University, 2024) page 19, available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>; National Audit Office (NAO), ‘Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (2025)’ Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls.pdf>.

³⁵ Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) – Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), ‘VAWG Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment’ (2024) Available at: <https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Uploads/VAWG-Strategic-Threat-and-Risk-Assessment-underpinning-and-informing-the-2024-VAWG-Statement-v2.pdf>

³⁶ HMICFRS/IOPC, Police Response to Stalking: Joint Inspection Report in Response to the Super-Complaint (2024). available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/police-response-to-stalking/>

³⁷ Centre for Protecting Women Online (CPWO), ‘Policing Technology-Facilitated and Online Violence Against Women: Landscape Review’ (Unpublished report, 2025); National Audit Office (NAO), ‘Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (2025)’ Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls.pdf>.

To address this, **OVAWG should be explicitly recognised within domestic abuse, stalking, and coercive control risk assessments.** The new National Centre for Public Protection, established to improve the policing response to VAWG, provides an opportunity to integrate digital safeguarding practices into standard policing procedures.

Finally, **public awareness of OVAWG must be improved**, alongside greater survivor support within policing and stronger accountability measures for digital platforms. Many victims do not report tech-facilitated abuse because they do not recognise it as a criminal offence or are unsure how to report it. Others are deterred by negative experiences with the policing response, leading to a lack of confidence in law enforcement's ability to take meaningful action.³⁸

Survivors consistently call for **better frontline support**, clearer reporting pathways, and greater awareness of tech-enabled abuse within the wider community (Refuge, 2022).³⁹ Platforms and social media companies must take a more active role in directing victims to appropriate law enforcement channels and specialist support services. Platforms should also be required to implement clear and accessible reporting mechanisms that allow users to flag incidents of online VAWG and receive guidance on next steps, including how to make a formal police report.

Additionally, **platform transparency and data-sharing** agreements between technology companies and policing must be improved to ensure that police forces can access relevant evidence in OVAWG investigations, while maintaining appropriate safeguards for privacy and victim protection.

In order to address these challenges in relation to OVAWG it is necessary to **invest in governmental funding** of programmes which co-design policy solutions from cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary perspective. The CPWO would be happy to participate in further discussions regarding this and to contribute expertise to any future policy development.

³⁸ ³⁸ O. Jurasz, 'Online violence against women: A Four Nations study' (The Open University, 2024) page 19, available at: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/96398/1/OVAW%204N%20full%20report%20%28March%202024%29.pdf>; National Audit Office (NAO), 'Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (2025)' Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls.pdf>.

³⁹ Refuge, 'Marked as Unsafe: How Online Platforms Are Failing Domestic Abuse Survivors' (2022) Available at: <https://refuge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Marked-as-Unsafe-report-FINAL.pdf>

Key recommendations

- Any future governmental strategy, policy or legislative measure developed to address VAWG needs to effectively and extensively address online violence against women and girls within its ambit.
- Funding needs to be allocated for large-scale research in relation to OVAWG before policy measures and prevention mechanisms are devised. The importance of collection of large-scale data in relation to OVAWG needs to be emphasised in future governmental strategies.
- Fragmented, incoherent responses that focus only on intimate image abuse or sexual harms to the exclusion of other online harms must be avoided.
- Measures must be aimed at changing the behaviours that lead to online harms, changing the design of technology and software which enables online harms and provide effective response that helps victims and reflects their lived online experiences.
- We encourage the government to develop guidance that creates coherent terminology in the field of OVAWG, capturing the full extent of harms and providing stronger protections and avenues for redress to victims. CPWO would be happy to support development of such guidance.
- Any legal measures addressing OVAWG need to be flexible enough to withstand any future technological developments, include effective mechanisms to remove harmful content from platforms and reflect lived experiences of women and girls.
- Such measures must be able to deal with the global nature of OVAWG and mechanisms for enforcement and cooperation should be put in place. Having comprehensive legislation and strengthening international cooperation on these issues globally is essential in combatting the growing rise of OVAWG.
- To ensure that policing can effectively respond to OVAWG, a structured, intelligence-led, and capability-focused approach must be adopted—one that is rooted in the lived experiences of victims and survivors.
- Any improvements to the policing response must be informed by survivor voices, centring their needs, experiences, and the barriers they face in seeking justice.

- Investment in digital investigation capabilities is critical. Many survivors report that officers lack the knowledge and resources to investigate online abuse, leaving them without protection or legal recourse.
- Appropriate and effective trauma informed training must be made mandatory across all forces, ensuring that all frontline officers can effectively identify, document, and investigate OVAWG cases.
- Reporting mechanisms and intelligence-sharing between police, online platforms, and support services must be strengthened. A formal process for reporting tech-facilitated abuse incidents from online platforms to law enforcement should be established.
- OVAWG should be explicitly recognised within domestic abuse, stalking, and coercive control risk assessments.
- Public awareness of OVAWG must be improved, alongside greater survivor support within policing and stronger accountability measures for digital platforms.
- Better frontline support must be established, clearer reporting pathways, and greater awareness of tech-enabled abuse within the wider community needs to be secured.
- Additionally, platform transparency and data-sharing agreements between technology companies and policing must be improved to ensure that police forces can access relevant evidence in OVAWG investigations, while maintaining appropriate safeguards for privacy and victim protection.
- It is necessary to invest in governmental funding of programmes which co-design policy solutions from cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary perspective. The CPWO would be happy to participate in further discussions regarding this and to contribute expertise to any future policy development.