"YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT IT"

GIRLS' RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Kerry Smith and Lucy Russell

As a reflection of both the 'Because I am a Girl' campaign, and the global Sustainable Development Goals' call for universal rights, Plan International UK has turned the spotlight on the current state of girls' rights across the UK. The resulting report (Russell et. al 2016) combined a literature review with a review of the current rights framework for the UK. It brought together interviews with 103 girls and a number of individual professionals working with girls. The research questioned why, in a relatively rich country, there are discrepancies in outcomes for girls' rights. It also conducted a first of its kind comparative analysis of outcomes for girls by local authority across England and Wales and examined how gender, age, class, ethnicity and race intersect with location.

Placing girls' experiences and lived reality at the centre of the analysis helped us view a deeply complex picture of girls' lives in contemporary Britain. Girls are navigating a complex set of conflicting narratives that dictate their gendered behaviour and shape expectations of their lives and access to rights. In particular, girls are experiencing pressure to be sexually desirable and knowledgeable at an early age, as they negotiate a digital communications landscape that permeates almost all of their social spheres. This digital world rapidly switches between being an empowering network and a solidarity building tool, to being a limiting and dangerous space.

From cyberbullying through to sexting and online trolling, the internet has come to be seen as a particularly unsafe space for girls and young women. This often results in responses that encourage girls to step away from the digital world and remove themselves. Within this paper we seek to explore how past approaches to violence against women which have required women to remove themselves from public spaces (Reclaim the Night, Wyke et al. 2016, Hornman, 2016) are now being echoed in conversations about digital spaces.

In this paper we also examine the question of whether existing rights frameworks address the realities of girls' experiences in the digital space and if not, whether an expansion is therefore required.

"There is no other life than technology."
Girls and digital life in the UK

Teenagers and young adults use the internet and social media more than any other age group (Ofcom, 2015). Over 70 per cent of five to 15-year-olds have access to a tablet or computer at home, and eight in 10 children aged 12 to 15 own a mobile phone. For children, the online and offline world can no longer be easily separated. The digital world is integrated into their education, their friendship networks, their leisure activities and their consumer habits.

There are also specific gendered differences in terms of how girls and boys use the internet: boys show greater preference for gaming and girls engage more in online communication (Ofcom, 2014).

All the girls in our discussion groups (Russell et.al. 2016) acknowledged that having access to internet, digital and/or mobile communications was an essential part of young people's daily lives. Indeed, the online and digital world was one of their most discussed topics, indicating how central digital and online communications are in their lives. The digital and online world was identified as a source of pleasure; a necessity; and a site of risk and anxiety. Our participants described their attachment to their technology, as can be seen in comments from our coastal/urban focus group of 16 to 17-year-old girls in northern England:

> Kaisa: *"My iPad is pretty much surgically attached to me!"*

> Jackie: *"There is no other life than technology. Remove the technology and there is no life."*

> Sophie: *"It has become an addiction; you can't live without it. If you don't have the internet, then you can't do anything."*

The girls explained how having access to digital communication, particularly messaging services and social media, was now a vital and integral part of forging and developing relationships, particularly peer relationships. Without access to online messaging, they would be left out of friendship networks and feel socially isolated.

> *"Without [the internet and social media], I wouldn't be as comfortably out as I am, I wouldn't have words for myself beyond lesbian, I wouldn't feel as connected to my community as I do..."* Sophia, 19

> *"If you never had a phone, that's quite restrictive, because you wouldn't be able to communicate with your friends. You would be left out. They'd go out and you wouldn't know or couldn't invite you unless they called you on your house phone or knocked at your door, which we don't do."* Ayesha, 17

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"Is this picture suitable?"
The pressure of digital life on girls

It is critical to understand power dynamics as expressed online. Research undertaken by EU Kids Online (Livingstone et al. 2010) suggests that cyberbullying is now more prevalent than face-to-face bullying in UK, most frequently occurring on social networking sites. The same research notes that 15 per cent of nine to 16-year-olds in the UK "have been bothered, uncomfortable or upset by something online in the past year. A further report found that 17 per cent of the children reported seeing sexual images, online or offline, in the past year (Livingstone, 2014). Another study found that girls were more likely "to report being upset by exclusions from social groups or friendships, and pressure to look or behave in a particular way" (Lilley et al. 2014).

Bullying can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, and for some can lead to more serious mental-health issues, such as self-harm and suicide (Girlguiding, 2015). The internet has therefore come to be seen as a particularly unsafe space for girls and young women. Rivers and Noret noted that "girls are more likely to experience ongoing cyber-bullying than boys and are more vulnerable to different kinds of risk, particularly of chatting to people online they do not know; being asked for personal details; receiving unwanted sexual comments; or being disturbed by violent or offensive pornographic context" (in Ringrose et al. 2012).

It is important to also recognise that gender based trolling and abuse often also comes layered with other discriminatory practices (see for example Flood, A. 2014 and Lamont, T. 2014). A recent EU (Ganesh, 2016) report found that online hate attacks against Muslim women are increasing, with verbal abuse and hate speech being the most common incidents. The report notes that often the most radical (far-right) social media users will "single out Muslim users, generally women, and engage in targeted campaigns of harassment, abuse and, even threats."

Alongside cyber-bullying, another recent significant concern regarding girls and digital life has been girls sharing sexual images and messages online, commonly described as sexting (Albury et al. 2013, Ringrose et al. 2013, Murray and Crofts 2015, Murray, Crofts, McGovern and Milivojevic 2015).   Ringrose et al. (2012) showed that harassment following sexting is usually directed by young men towards young women. They conclude that sexting is not a gender neutral practice; it is shaped by the gender dynamics of the peer group in which, primarily, boys harass girls, and it is exacerbated by the gendered norms of popular culture, and by families and schools failing to recognise the problem or support girls. They also found considerable evidence of the age-old double standard by which sexually active boys are admired and sexually active girls denigrated and called 'sluts'.

> *"If you are talking to a guy, as soon as you show interest they all expect pictures. If you don't [send them], they will start calling you names, accusing you of not being interested or of being a man or not who you are, because you won't show a picture. They will try anything to force you to show them a picture." Jay, 21*

Some of the girls participating in our study had been the victims of online grooming. Abigail, a white British young woman from coastal/urban northern England, now in her twenties, had been the victim of online grooming when younger.

> *"I don't have a phone or anything. So it is hard to see my friends; I only really see one of my friends … I did have two phones and an iPad. Social media can get out of hand. I got a bit addicted to talking to people online. And I think that's what makes, especially younger girls, less safe. I didn't know who I was talking to. I'd talk to more people, older people than I would in real life, face-to-face… That can lead to grooming. It led to grooming with me."* Abigail, 23

Abigail's response to her exploitation, and her strategy to keep herself safe now, was to avoid all digital technology. In doing so, however, she isolated herself from her peer group and from potentially positive relationships and social opportunities. Furthermore, other girls we interviewed also described the importance of mobile technology in trying to keep safe. A group of 13-year-old Asian British girls from London's East End, said they always made sure that they had their phones with them when using public transport, and that at moments when they felt unsafe walking in public spaces they would ring a friend or a family member for a chat – this made them feel less vulnerable.

"We don't know who she is actually talking to."
Girls' thoughts about risks online

In our research, girls expressed a range of strategies to maintain autonomy and privacy online. Some found themselves caught between their desire to participate in peer group interactions and family expectations of appropriate social relationships, as this conversation between a group of young Asian women aged 18 to 20 in urban Scotland illustrates:

> *"We have a lot of guy friends we get on so well with whenever we go out as a group. It is so difficult trying to hide it from our families. Everyone posts something on Facebook or tags us all in; then you have to delete all your cousins so your parents or your uncles don't find out. The golden rule for Asian girls is: don't have your family on Facebook!"* Zainab

While many of the girls recounted positive experiences of being online, they also described the internet as a site of risk and anxiety which had to be navigated, and a source of concern regarding safety, harassment, coercion and bullying. This ranged from worries about 'stranger danger' (expressed more frequently by the younger girls in the focus groups, or by older girls in relation to their concerns for younger girls), to issues of peer-on-peer cyber-bullying, to sexual coercion and grooming. A white British girl from coastal/urban northern England told us how she had concerns about her younger sister's safety online:

> *"My little sister is in the popular group, and you've got to be seen to have hundreds of thousands of friends on Facebook. … My sister does that: she takes a photo and tags*

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everything, even [photos of her] in her school uniform. I've had a go at her about it. Someone could track down that logo, and it has been known for people to wait for someone outside the school. And she's my little sister and I don't want anything happening to her." Jackie, 17

Another girl from the same focus group said:

"Facebook is nothing. Facebook is like a tiny dog when you have all these Alsatians." Sophie, 17

In the main, the girls were very aware of the risks of being online and talked in detail about the strategies they, or their parents, put in place to try to be safe, as the following conversation between white British girls from urban Wales aged 12 to 13 indicates:

Karen: *"My parents are quite protective of me and watch over me. I'm only allowed to follow people I know and accept follower requests from people I know. Because the dangerous thing about social media is that the person behind the screen could be someone different from who you are looking at."*

Cerys: *"Sometimes, if someone requests to follow me who I don't know, I say yes and then look through all their followers to see if there is anyone I know who is following them. If I don't know them, I block them."*

"Don't feed the trolls"
Narratives on censorship and removal from digital space

Our report, (Russell et al, 2016) found that in girls' day to days lives, stories emerged about 'no-go spaces' in their physical environment. Whether consciously or unconsciously, girls were setting rules about which streets they could use, which route to jog, where to sit on the bus and so on. It is now a reasonably well understood concern that responses to violence against women and girls, for example sexual harassment on the streets or on public transport, which urge women to remove themselves from the situation are problematic (Reclaim the Night website, Gadd, 2014). This is in the most part because they do not start from a position that women have a right to be in public spaces that are free from violence.

We found discourses that suggest women and girls remove themselves from spaces where violence against women and girls happens are being replicated in the digital world. In no part of this discussion do we wish to undermine the seriousness of online threats, nor the impact on the individual, psychologically and in the physical world. As the Chair of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, Vera Baird QC states: *"One misconception about technology-facilitated abuse is that online harassment is not real abuse – yet much of the abuse to which the victim is exposed is often tied to offline behaviours, including stalking and assault."* (Hadley, 2017).

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In explaining her own experiences and those reported on the Everyday Sexism website Bates (2016) notes there are a number of concerning approaches namely:

- **"What did you say to annoy them?"** People who respond like this imply that online abuse is at least partly the fault of the victim…
- **"Have you thought about shutting down your Twitter account?"** …Silencing is the end goal of the majority of abuse…
- **"Don't feed the trolls…"** No matter how well-meaning it might be, telling someone how they should respond plays into the idea that they are somehow responsible for provoking, or capable of preventing, the abuse."

In a bid to protect girls online, sexual and gendered double standards are reproduced, either by restricting girls' sexual expression (in a way that is not applied to boys), or victim blaming, for example by putting the onus of responsibility onto girls when naked or sexually explicit images of them are shared without their consent. The short film produced by the UK's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre to highlight the dangers of sharing sexually explicit photos online has, for instance, been critiqued for reproducing such sexual double standards, because it focuses on the danger girls put themselves in when they send images, rather than on the boys who circulate them without consent (Hasinoff, 2013).

As Lumsden and Morgan (2017) summarise
"The advice often given to those who are victims of online abuse – "do not feed the troll" …is a "silencing strategy", for in doing so the victim is unable to challenge or resist…language and attitudes. Underlying the trolling of visible and audible women is the deeply entrenched misogynistic idea of silencing women (Sarah Beresford 2015)."

This pervasive narrative of "don't feed the trolls" is supported by the anecdotes told to us by member of Plan International UK's Youth Advisory Panel. For instance, Kinza, 19 told us about a sexting incident that occurred when she was at school. It demonstrated the gendered nature of both the reaction of the young people, and the schools response. She explained that sexting happened frequently:

> *"I've seen many girls in school do things they regret later on. But at the time, they believe it's so 'boys will respect them'... In all cases I've seen, the girl ends up upset and the guy doesn't keep anything private. Not just nude photos, but even pressuring the girl to engage in physical activity with them to prove that 'she loves him' and to show the boy that she is a growing woman. The boys' then boast to their friends about what happened, leaving the girl in tears...How did the school deal with it? With the girls' case, parents would be called in and there would be a meeting. I've seen girls move school because of it! (And that's a joint decision of parents and teachers', they decide that the girl will be transferred so she won't be bullied). With the boys, not much happens."*

Another Youth Advisory Panel member, Shan, 16, told us about how she attended an all-girls school with a partner all-boys school nearby. The interaction between the girls and boys had led to cyberbullying. However, what is of particular interest is the different schools' reactions:

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"In my school there was a problem with cyberbullying and drama/gossip on phones, and because the teachers thought girls were more affected they were the ones who were banned from using phones in school, the boys' school did not have the same ban".

What is recognised across the research is the importance of speaking to girls and young women about their online practices (rather than focusing primarily on the opinions of parents, policy makers or the media) to find out what they think and feel about the digital and online dimensions of their lives. Lee and Crofts (2015) note that "privileging adult perceptions [regarding sexting] can reproduce the very inequalities and double standards young girls already experience", and that "the voices of the young women who have actually *engaged in* the practice need to be heard and clearly distinguished from what the broader cohort *think* or *perceive* about the practice".

It is a generally agreed principle that to further girls' rights and equality, society needs to encourage and support girls to engage in politics and to become the leaders of the future (Goulds, 2014). However, we must not forget that this future will be digital. The majority of influencers and decision makers are now using digital and the media to lead and govern. It is therefore essential that we approach the question of digital safety, access and voice not simply from an individual, one to one perspective, but also as a core structure in the communication tools of our society, and pivotally, as a platform for active citizenship and voice. Questions of girls' safety and harassment as well as the question of their access and use of digital platforms must acknowledge that they actually address the question of girls' right to have a voice.

This context is vital to help us understand the wider and long-term implications of online harassment that begins in adolescence. As Bates (2015) notes "as we saw during the Scottish referendum campaign, online spaces have become vitally important parts of the democratic process, particularly for young people. Many are now setting out their own arguments in blogs; learning how to debate on forums; influencing others using networks... To ignore the abuse that is making such spaces hostile and unsafe for so many people is to exclude them from fully participating in that process."

The international rights framework

"My dad thought we were using the internet too much, so he switched it off for a day. I was okay; I had my college books and stuff. But my little sister was, like, 'It's a right!'" Kasia, 17

When examining the international human rights framework, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the key convention when considering the protection of the rights of children. One of the key principles is expressed in Article 12 which ensures children's rights to express their views and to participate in the decision-making processes that affect them. Girls are also protected by the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which calls on the international community to undertake measures to end gender discrimination in all forms.

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Technology has been explicitly recognised in discourses about the freedom of expression and access to information in the CRC, where **Article 17 states:**

> *"States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.*

The importance of technology has also been recognised in promoting women's and girls' rights for instance article 75 of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) states:

> *"Technology is rapidly changing the world and has also affected the developing countries. It is essential that women not only benefit from technology, but also participate in the process from the design to the application, monitoring and evaluation stages."*

In September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was unanimously adopted by 193 Member States at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit. The 17 new Global Goals and their 169 targets form the blueprint for action in the years to 2030 and, as already mentioned, are universal. The role of technology is emphasised throughout the goals, most importantly, for Goal 5 on Gender Equality, where target 5.b calls for *"enhancing the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women"*.

Is this framework being applied and is it adequate?

A key question we wish to raise is whether the existing international rights framework and government responses can keep up with the speed of the ever-changing digital world, particularly in ensuring girls' safety and right to have a voice on this global platform. Certainly the UK government and devolved administrations have driven a strong child protection agenda, (for example, Children Act 1989, Children and Families Act 2014, Children and Young People Scotland Act 2014, Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) 2011).

Offences regarding child pornography are now well established (Crown Prosecution Service 2016). Image based sexual abuse was made an offence in England and Wales under the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015. Prosecutions for online trolling have now being taken forward and a number of high profile cases (See in Lumsden and Morgan 2017 and BBC 2014) have publically demonstrated wider social norms messaging about acceptable behaviour. New legislation has demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of online abuse, however, such prosecutions only represent a very small proportion of the actual offences occurring and also represent cases where the abuse is considered, by the person reporting it, to be grave enough to warrant taking the matter to the police. Such prosecutions are unlikely to include the everyday harassment (Russell et al.) experienced by many girls. This child protection and preventing abuse driven agenda is to be welcomed, but it often fails to promote girls' agency in the process and the rights of girls to participate in digital life.

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Our research (Russell et al. 2016) also highlighted the difference between rights and legal frameworks as they exist on paper (or on the screen) alongside girls' lived experiences of their own harassment and the legal or other protective responses to their concerns. Furthermore, there is a question about whether a rights framework can respond effectively to pressures of a market-driven digital world that purposely seeks out girls as potential consumers. If being thin and having flawless skin, and the accompanying factors of expected body image (for further discussion see Russell et al 2016), remain as commercial drivers, what factors exist to protect girls from such messages?

The law in the UK acknowledges the wider commercial pressures British children are exposed to, and the potential negative impacts they can have in other areas. For instance, proposed taxes on sugary drinks (Forster, 2017) along with the ban on tobacco advertising (BBC, 2005). Certainly the Children's Commissioner for England feels the current CRC is inadequate, her report (2016) outlines a new "Digital United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" she is now supporting Professor Sonia Livingstone to review the convention and bring it up to date for a digital age.

In conclusion the UK legal system is making very positive steps to address rights in a digital world, but criminal and civil measures do not deal with it in the same way they do in the real world (Hadley, 2017). Although the legal and rights framework exists on paper, this is not the lived experience of girls using digital who feel unsafe and unsupported.

Recommendations

Current recommendations for improving the situation for young people experiencing online harassment fall broadly into four approaches, these cover:

- **Education for young people**

A key solution articulated by the girls and boys we have spoken to is to update and enforce SRE in all schools. Across research and policy we can also see a growing call for sex and relationships education (SRE) to address digital safety, resilience skills, understanding and rights (CRAE 2016b, Hadley, 2017, Children's Commissioner 2016). It is critical therefore that new government guidance on teaching SRE addresses online harassment, and specifically girls' rights to use the digital world safely. Certainly the English Children's Commissioner (2016) has criticised current education provision in that it does not address the social elements of life, including "how to assess representations of body image and how other people portray their lives online." Her report also calls for a "broader digital citizenship programme" to be obligatory in every school, she also emphasises the importance or peer led education from older children wherever possible. Certainly we would agree with this recommendation and look forward to seeing the content of forthcoming Department for Education guidance on SRE, with a hope that it will address protection balanced with the right to be in digital spaces. The balance struck will be pivotal to ensure the burden of

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change and protection does not fall to girls alone but that we do equip them fairly to claim their space online.

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  - **The social media community policing itself**

Online conversations are emerging that address the responsibility of those using social media to form a community and to police themselves. Bates (2015) notes that "in the same way that we encourage people to step in if they witness racist abuse or sexual harassment in public, it is also possible to be active bystanders online. If we want to change what's socially acceptable, we all have to play a part in creating new norms. Instead of focusing on how victims respond ("Don't feed the trolls," being common, or "If you don't like it, don't use Twitter"), let's encourage others around them to step in and raise their voices instead. Challenging perpetrators sends the clear message that abuse is unacceptable, while offering support and solidarity can also be invaluable."

Similarly, anti-female genital mutilation campaigner Nimco Ali established the 'fanny defence league' (#FDL) to campaign for her topic and to create a hashtag based support community on Twitter (Lunn, 2015).

- **The role and responsibility of social media platforms**

A new campaign for safety online states on its website

"Just as a pub or club landlord chooses when to throw someone out if they are harassing or intimidating others, platforms have to choose how to respond to complaints, when to intervene, or how to work with the police and others if crimes are committed". (Reclaim the Internet)

Certainly the majority of the main social media providers have responses and policies in place (see Facebook's Community Standards and Twitter's Safety Center [sic.]). The APPG Domestic Abuse (Hadley, 2017) takes the matter further to call on online providers to train the police, prosecutors and the judiciary on how their products work and to "work in partnership with specialist services to ensure that online support teams understand the nature and impact of these crimes, and respond to victims effectively."

- **The justice system**

Policy recommendations include increasing resources for the police (CRAE 2016a), stronger, robust sanctions that don't blame victims (Hadley, 2017) improved international co-operation (Bakina, 2017) and anonymity protection for those subject to image based sexual abuse (Police and Crime Commissioner, North Yorkshire).

A new recommendation - A girls' rights approach

Were all these suggested solutions to be fulfilled, girls' rights would be better protected, but we welcome their progress with caution. In this paper we explored where the burden of change sits and we now ask; are girls' being told that it is their responsibility to learn, protect, support, report and speak up all at once? Is this fair? Or is this the reality of life of a young person in 2017s digital world? Moving on from this paper we would like to explore how all parties can share the burden of change for girls more equally and to explore how such ambitions are achieved at a pace that reflects the rapid changing digital world.

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What is missing in most conversations, but does underlie many calls for action, is a rights approach. Most importantly this needs to be a rights approach that considers both children's rights and women's rights to allow for the intersection of youth and gender. It must also consider how other identity factors are impacted by digital harassment (see also 'Identity discrimination: who girls are and what happens to them' in Russell et al. 2016). This is the approach we would like to see developed, and at the heart of this approach would be support for girls' agency and their participation, voices and opinions. In our report (Russell et al. 2016) we called for the UK to have a delivery strategy for the SDGs that works across government departments. The SDGs make clear statements about the role of technology in equality and how it will be a core part of the rights frameworks of the future. There are some exciting opportunities and clear pointers on how to progress the situation for the better, what remains to be seen is whether the rights of girls and their lived experiences will be effectively considered and supported.

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N.B.
1) The names of all focus group participants have been changed.
2) The more commonly used phrase 'revenge porn' has been replaced by the phrase image-based sexual abuse

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