Online harms and men and boys' health

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A Practical Taxonomy:
Executive Summary

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Acknowledgements

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ABOUT MOVEMBER

Since 2003, Movember has challenged the status quo, shaken up men's health research, and transformed the way health services reach and support men – taking on prostate cancer, testicular cancer, mental health, and suicide prevention with unwavering determination. Movember has raised over $1 billion for men's health, thanks to a passionate network of Mos. These critical funds have delivered more than 1,000 men's health projects around the world. Championing new research, cutting-edge treatments, and healthy behaviours. To learn more, please visit www.movember.com

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is a fiercely independent organisation dedicated to safeguarding individual rights, democratic processes, national security and public safety against the rising tide of authoritarianism and extremism globally. For over 20 years, ISD has been a leader in understanding and addressing online harms, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence, misogyny, targeted hate and abuse, and the role of digital platforms and emerging technologies in enabling and amplifying these harms. Our work combines research and analysis of online ecosystems, platform features and behaviours with the development of practical tools, policy recommendations and prevention approaches to strengthen online safety. To learn more, please visit www.isdglobal.org

Executive summary

From financially-motivated sexual extortion and betting apps to body image pressures and AI companions, online spaces are shaping men and boys' health in ways we are only beginning to understand. This report brings these harms together for the first time, revealing how they connect, how platform design amplifies them, and where policy applies and falls short. It offers a practical guide for anyone working to keep men and boys safe and well online.

Overview

UNITED KINGDOM

91%

Victims of financially-motivated sexual extortion cases reported who are male

CANADA

87%

Victims of financially-motivated sexual extortion cases reported who are male

IRELAND

93%

Victims of financially-motivated sexual extortion cases reported who are male

UNITED STATES

2x

In the United States, suicidal ideation is nearly twice as likely among male college students subject to online harassment

CANADA

▲154%

In Ontario, Canada, emergency room visits for gambling addiction among males aged 10 to 29 were 154 percent higher after an expansion of the online betting market.

EUROPEAN UNION

30%

Across the EU, 30 percent of boys aged 13–18 were recently promoted gambling on social media (compared to 26 percent of girls), with boys just as likely as girls to report pressure to share intimate images (10 percent).

There is a growing discourse and body of research on the intersection of online harms, gender and adverse health outcomes among men and boys, ranging from studies of negative body image to financial exploitation, unhealthy relationships and loneliness. But there is currently no integrated framework combining harms together into a coherent evidence base which systematically assesses the specific role of digital environments in shaping men's and boys' health outcomes.

Responding to this need – and building on evidence from Movember's Young Men and Media Collective on the health risks associated with the 'Relentlessly Ripped and Rich' narrative online – ISD and Movember have developed a first-of-its-kind public health-informed taxonomy of online harms affecting men and boys. This resource maps out how different online services, platform design features, online communities and digital ecosystems amplify gendered harms. It then analyses how these tech-facilitated harms are reflected within different policy and regulatory frameworks – with a focus on the UK, Canada and Ireland, and drawing instructive comparisons to Australia, New Zealand and the wider EU.

While rooted in the academic research base, this taxonomy is intended to serve as a practical resource to underpin gender-responsive public health responses to these harms by policymakers, practitioners and platforms. The report spotlights specific takeaways for the wide range of sectors with a stake in tackling online harms impacting men and boys' health.

Approach

The taxonomy's development is rooted in a mixed methods approach, drawing on a robust review of the existing evidence base on online harms impacting men and boys' health, granular cross-jurisdictional policy mapping, and deep consultations with experts and practitioners across government departments and academic disciplines.

A full methodology for the taxonomy development and policy mapping can be found in the accompanying methodological annex.

01

Evidence review

A targeted review of academic literature, government research and other relevant evidence on online harms affecting boys and men's health, surfaced a wide range of harmful online experiences, behaviours and practices, alongside a broad spread of documented impacts on health and wellbeing. The evidence review also informed the identification of research gaps, including areas where the health consequences of online harms, their specific relationship with digital environments, or how harms are gendered remains less clearly established, and emerging harms where empirical evidence is limited.

02

Expert consultation

A series of expert consultations helped to validate findings, refine the taxonomy, identify gaps, and provide practical insights on how different harms intersect with a broad range of policy areas. ISD and Movember are very grateful for the experts who so generously shared their wide-ranging expertise, thoughtful reflections and practical insights across cross-government roundtables in the UK and Canada, a dedicated consultation with online safety experts in Ireland, and a working session of regulators and digital policy makers hosted by ISD's Digital Policy Lab.*

03

Taxonomy development

Drawing on this evidence, we developed a systematised framework for mapping core features of identified harms, including:

- Nature of harm: Harm definitions, examples of their online manifestation, and how men and boys may experience these harms differently or be particularly affected.
- Digital pathways and mechanisms: How online environments may facilitate, amplify or catalyse online harms. This includes the role of specific platform types, online ecosystems, features and affordances, and wider social or commercial dynamics.
- Adverse consequences and impacts: Evidence of harmful effects on men and boys' physical, mental, sexual, financial and relational wellbeing, including impacts extending beyond the individual to interpersonal, community and societal levels.

04

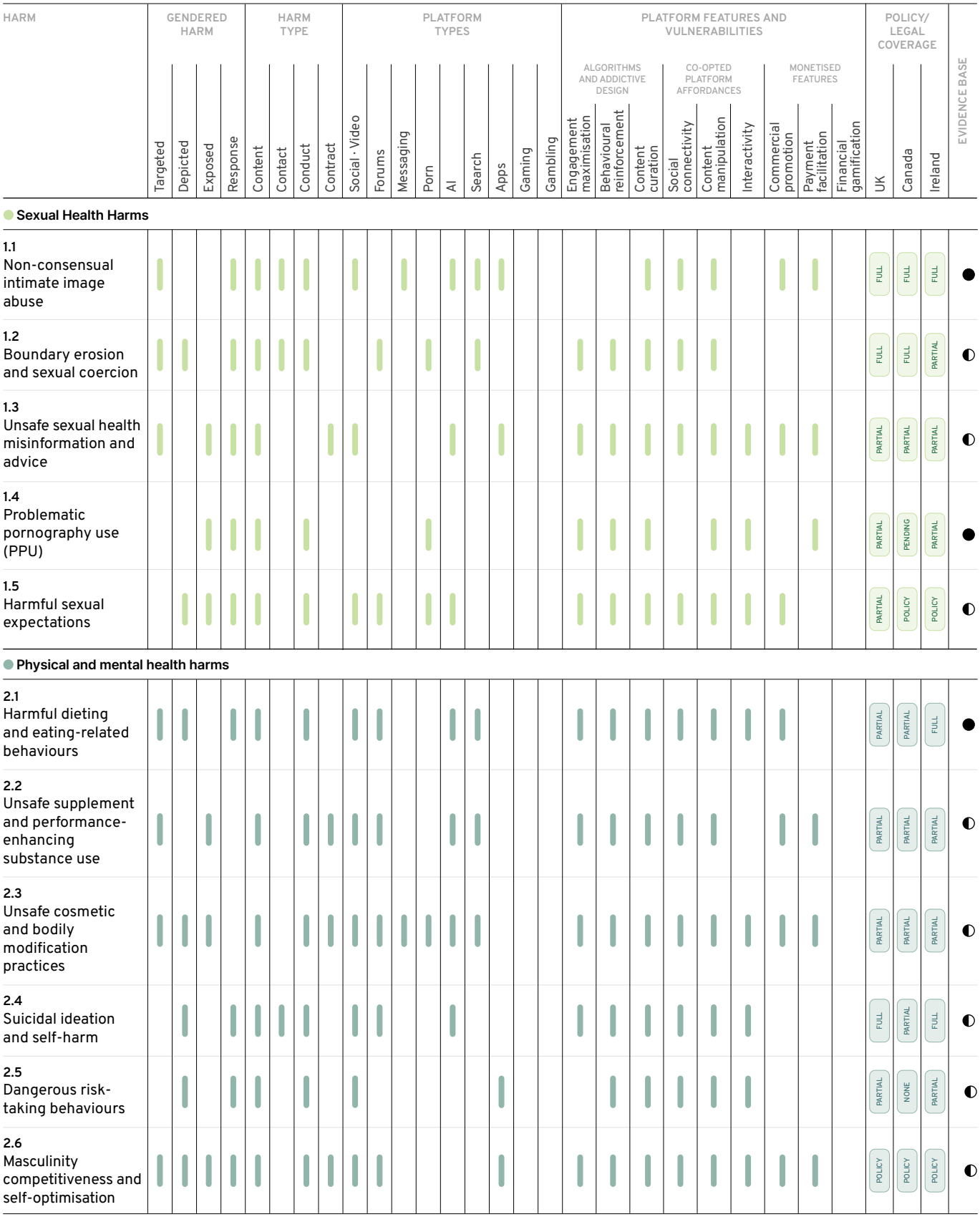
Policy mapping

Targeted analysis of over two hundred regulatory and policy frameworks relevant to the identified harms, examining whether, where and how existing regulatory and policy approaches address online harms affecting boys and young men. The analysis focused primarily on the UK, Canada and Ireland (as well as wider EU frameworks relevant to the Irish context), while also drawing comparative insights from Australia and New Zealand. The mapping considered both online harms regulation and wider policy frameworks relevant to their prevention and mitigation, including consumer and financial protection, gambling, data protection, and sexual or image-based abuse. This reflects the fact that identified harms often fall across multiple areas of policy responsibility.

*The Digital Policy Lab (DPL) is an inter-governmental working group convened by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), comprising representatives of relevant ministries and regulatory bodies from selected democracies. It facilitates inter-governmental exchange, provides access to research and expertise, and supports an international community of practice addressing challenges in digital policy and online harms.

Taxonomy at-a-glance

Online harms taxonomy: Assessment of existing research base for 22 online harms with an evidenced impact on men and boys' health.



HARM	GENDERED HARM				HARM TYPE				PLATFORM TYPES									PLATFORM FEATURES AND VULNERABILITIES									POLICY/ LEGAL COVERAGE			EVIDENCE BASE
																		ALGORITHMS AND ADDICTIVE DESIGN			CO-OPTED PLATFORM AFFORDANCES			MONETISED FEATURES						
	Targeted	Depicted	Exposed	Response	Content	Contact	Conduct	Contract	Social · Video	Forums	Messaging	Porn	AI	Search	Apps	Gaming	Gambling	Engagement maximisation	Behavioural reinforcement	Content curation	Social connectivity	Content manipulation	Interactivity	Commercial promotion	Payment facilitation	Financial gamification	UK	Canada	Ireland	
Relational and psychosocial harms																													
3.1 Bullying and harassment	▮			▮	▮	▮	▮		▮		▮					▮	▮		▮	▮	▮	▮					FULL	FULL	FULL	●
3.2 Gender antagonism	▮	▮			▮	▮	▮		▮	▮			▮		▮	▮		▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮				POLICY	POLICY	PARTIAL	◐
3.3 Online misogyny		▮	▮		▮	▮	▮		▮	▮	▮	▮	▮				▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮		PARTIAL	PARTIAL	PARTIAL	◐
3.4 Isolation and emotional suppression		▮		▮	▮	▮	▮		▮	▮								▮	▮	▮	▮						POLICY	POLICY	POLICY	◐
3.5 Despair and hopelessness reinforcement		▮	▮	▮	▮	▮			▮	▮								▮	▮	▮	▮	▮					PARTIAL	PENDING	PARTIAL	○
3.6 Emotional dependency on AI companions			▮	▮	▮	▮	▮						▮					▮					▮				PARTIAL	PENDING	PARTIAL	○
Financial harms																													
4.1 Gambling-related harms	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮		▮	▮	▮		▮					▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮			▮	▮	▮	FULL	PARTIAL	FULL	●
4.2 Financial scams and fraud	▮	▮		▮	▮	▮		▮	▮		▮								▮	▮	▮	▮			▮	▮		FULL	PARTIAL	FULL	●
4.3 Financial sexual extortion	▮			▮	▮	▮		▮	▮		▮				▮			▮			▮	▮					FULL	FULL	FULL	●
4.4 High-risk speculative trading	▮	▮		▮	▮		▮	▮	▮								▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	▮	FULL	PARTIAL	FULL	◐
4.5 Exploitative coaching and wealth schemes	▮	▮		▮	▮	▮		▮	▮					▮					▮	▮	▮	▮		▮	▮		PARTIAL	PARTIAL	PARTIAL	◐

LEGEND

GENDERED HARM

Targeted — Gender shapes targeting or exploitation.
Depicted — Gendered portrayals reinforce harmful norms.
Exposed — Gender shapes exposure or impact.
Response/help — Gender shapes responses and help-seeking.

HARM TYPE

Content — Exposure to potentially harmful material.
Contact — Harmful human (or AI) interactions.
Conduct — Risks from users' own behaviour.
Contract — Commercial exploitation and transaction risks.

EVIDENCE BASE

○ Hypothesised ◐ Emergent ● Established

PLATFORMS

Social / Video includes audio; AI includes companions and GenAI; Apps combines dating, commerce, paid creator communities and specialist apps; Gambling combines betting, trading and crypto.

POLICY

Full — binding law directly covers harm.
Partial — some aspects covered.
Policy — non-binding policy or guidance only.
Pending — measures awaiting adoption or commencement.
None — no identified framework

Key findings

HARMS MAPPING

Four overarching harm areas underpin the taxonomy: Sexual health harms, physical and mental health harms, relational and psychosocial harms, and financial harms. ISD identified 22 distinct harm types with a digital dimension, gendered component and demonstrable health impact evidenced in the research base.

Harms are interconnected: Our taxonomy evidences how different harms intersect and reinforce one another, with research showing all harms have some demonstrable connection with at least one other in the taxonomy. For example, financial sexual extortion was shown to very often also encompass dimensions of self-harm, financial harm and sexual exploitation, requiring a joined-up approach to harm prevention.

Online harms are highly gendered: While few harms in the taxonomy are unique to boys and young men, the research shows how masculine norms, gendered expectations, developmental stages and wider social circumstances shape gender-specific exposure, experiences of harm, vulnerability, help-seeking and subsequent consequences for health and wellbeing. 45 percent of harms were found to be gendered based on who is exposed, 64 percent from who is targeted, 64 percent from what the content depicts, and 82 percent from specific ways in which men respond and seek help.

Technology shapes harm: Our research mapped the impact of a broad range of platform types, features and online communities in facilitating harm, from AI tools to social media to trading sites. However, three specific features —addictive design, algorithmic amplification and monetisation—were at the core of all the harms mapped in the taxonomy, showing how the intersection of platform design, commercial incentives and technological affordances create, shape and amplify risk.

HEALTH IMPACTS

Building on the Lancet's digital determinants of health framework, and the multilevel approaches adopted in existing taxonomies of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), we adopted a public health lens that recognises online harms' impacts extend beyond immediate individual experiences, affecting relationships, communities and wider social structures. The framework identifies impacts across four interconnected levels:

Individual: Psychological, physical, sexual, relational and financial consequences to individuals, including impacts on mental health and wellbeing, bodily health and autonomy, sexual health and functioning, self-esteem, financial security and everyday functioning. These are captured within the taxonomy's harms mapping.

Interpersonal: Impacts of online harms on trust, intimacy and relationship functioning, including difficulties establishing or maintaining relationships, social withdrawal, coercion, aggression and the reinforcement of harmful gender relations.

Community: Impacts on social norms, belonging and exclusion, including normalising of harmful masculine ideals, harassment and discrimination, diminished community participation, and the commercialisation of belonging through communities that condition acceptance on appearance, status or financial success.

Societal: Wider implications of online harms for public health and inequalities, social cohesion, polarisation and public safety, including potential reinforcement of misogynistic attitudes, diminished collective agency and trust in institutions.

Developmental and intersectional considerations cut across these levels, with the framework showing how impacts can differ considerably by age and developmental stage. It also evidences how online harms may disproportionately affect particular groups of men and boys, including gay, bisexual, trans and queer men and boys, as well as indigenous populations, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities in health, safety and social connectedness.

POLICY MAPPING

A kaleidoscope of policy and regulatory levers: Our mapping identified over two hundred regulatory and policy frameworks relevant to harms in the taxonomy across focus jurisdictions, including 75 in the UK, 56 in Canada and 70 in Ireland (including EU frameworks that apply in Ireland as a Member State). These ranged across criminal law, online safety, data protection, drugs and health products regulation, gambling and finance laws, education and violence, and abuse frameworks, demonstrating the breadth and complexity of the existing policy, legal and regulatory landscape relevant to harms to men and boys.

Some harms are well covered, others ignored: We saw a comparable policy response across the mapped jurisdictions for illegal harms with clear acts of commission and a victim/perpetrator (such as non-consensual intimate imagery, financial sexual extortion, fraud, harassment, assisted suicide). However, most systemic, digitally native harms with a less clear point of origin and differing in research consensus are subject to varying regulatory approaches. Meanwhile the harms most specific to men and boys (including masculinity competitiveness and self-optimisation, as well as emotional suppression) garner little to no policy response.

Significant divergences in approach across country contexts: While the UK and Ireland have online safety regimes in place that address online risks more broadly, Canada currently relies on criminal and sector-specific law at a federal level, with many relevant frameworks operating on a provincial and territorial level. The UK's recent Crime and Policing Act 2026 provides unique powers for addressing non-consensual intimate imagery and the first binding measures on pornography that shapes harmful sexual expectations. Meanwhile, Ireland's efforts uniquely bring together national and EU-level frameworks, with particular recent efforts made on gambling, including rapid action on regulating prediction markets.

Online safety laws at the heart of addressing overarching harms: Much of the opportunity for addressing gendered health harms rests on the successful implementation of new and emerging digital policy legislation. The UK Online Safety Act and EU Digital Services Act provide solid frameworks for addressing platform design (including recommender systems), rather than just specific content. In Canada, Bill C-34, the Safe Social Media Act, provides an opportunity to learn from promising practices as well as gaps in other online safety regimes. However, across the board there are limitations in coverage of emerging harms (such as AI), a narrow focus on children rather than the lifecycle of harms that extends into adulthood, and a lack of statutory requirements to address online harms impacting men and boys.

RESEARCH GAPS

Substantial evidence documents the impact of harms identified in the taxonomy, but important gaps remain in understanding how digital environments contribute to these, and how boys and young men specifically experience them (especially due to factors such as age, or sexual orientation). These gaps are laid out in research 'scorecards' in the taxonomy.

Across all four harm areas, research frequently identifies associations between online engagement and adverse outcomes but provides less clarity on causality, the mechanisms through which harms develop or escalate, and their longer-term health consequences.

Key overarching research gaps concern how masculine norms and gendered expectations shape exposure, vulnerability, experiences of harm and help-seeking. This manifests within each harm area in different ways:

- Sexual health: Research on boys' and young men's sexual development, harmful expectations and experiences of victimisation remains limited.
- Physical and mental health: Pathways connecting online self-optimisation cultures, harmful health behaviours and suicidality require further research.
- Relational and psychosocial harms: Evidence is needed on how technology contributes to gender antagonism, as well as on AI companionship and its implications for relationships and wellbeing.
- Financial harm: Research is lacking on gendered vulnerabilities, particularly how masculine aspirations surrounding wealth and status intersect with speculative trading, prediction markets and exploitative commercial practices.

Future research should prioritise gender-sensitive, longitudinal approaches that examine how platform design and commercial incentives shape these harms, identify protective factors and explore how harms intersect across domains.

Key takeaways

Sectoral

01

Policy makers, regulators and legal

This constituency is uniquely placed to act upstream, shaping policy, regulatory and legal conditions in which online harms arise and are addressed. These include platform design choices, commercial practices and product standards that shape exposure to harms. The taxonomy can inform coordinated cross-government responses to harms across a broad range of departments and functions. It can help regulators develop guidance and risk assessment expectations for design features, recommender systems and commercial models contributing to gendered harm. And where harms are illegal, it can demonstrate the interconnectedness of harms to inform preventative approaches.

02

Public health sector

The taxonomy provides an important evidence base on the specific linkages between online harms and adverse health outcomes. This includes how to apply a gender lens in understanding how online harms manifest, are recognised and are responded to, as well as considering implications for primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Insights on how digital features—including recommender systems, monetisation models and commercial marketing—are determinants of health can inform public health strategies. It can also underpin gender-responsive public health analysis of how online harms are distributed, including differences within groups of men and boys by age and sexual orientation.

03

Education, youth and prevention practitioners

Schools, youth services, sports clubs, families and safeguarding organisations are important settings for prevention and early intervention; adolescence and early adulthood are formative periods for identity, relationships and beliefs about masculinity, sexuality, status and success. The taxonomy provides a practical tool for recognising how gendered online harms manifest and their specific impact on young people's wellbeing. This can inform understanding of sector-specific risks. For example, youth workers and sports clubs should understand how online fitness, appearance and "self-improvement" content may shape boys' training, diet and use of performance-enhancing substances; while understanding how boys specifically become victims of online sexual exploitation is particularly important for child protection services.

04

Civil society and research

The taxonomy offers a common framework for analysing and documenting gendered online harms across the civil society and research sectors. For researchers, the mapping of the existing evidence base can inform strategic efforts to address research gaps, including around AI risks, prediction markets, and male-specific outcome data – drawing on the taxonomy's definitions to measure exposure to specific harms, design features and communities. The taxonomy can inform a gender-responsive approach for civil society that recognises that many identified online harms reinforce hostility and harmful expectations toward women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, as well as affecting boys and men's own wellbeing.

05

Platforms and industry

Social media platforms and other digital services design, operate and monetise the online environments in which many harms in the taxonomy arise, from social, gaming and dating platforms to pornography, AI, commerce and gambling services. The taxonomy provides a basis for understanding harms to guide policy development, moderation and product design. This can support gender-responsive risk assessment and safety by design, as well as better coordination with regulators, researchers, health services and civil society partners. The report draws out specific considerations for responses from dating, gaming, commerce and pornography platforms, based on platform-specific risks captured in the taxonomy.

Key takeaways

National

01

United Kingdom

As the UK enters a key phase of implementation of the Online Safety Act, civil society experts have called for several structural changes to strengthen the core regulatory regime and focus on safety by design, as well as bring chatbots into scope. Upgrading Ofcom's voluntary guidance on gender-based violence to a mandatory Code of Practice would ensure more impactful platform responses to gender-based violence. Alongside regulation, it is crucial the gendered health impacts of online harms is sufficiently reflected in the implementation of both the Youth and Men's Health strategy, while the 2027 National Summit for Men and Boys provides a crucial opportunity for centring the gendered impact of online harms. Lining up men and boys' health-focused efforts with a commitment to halving violence against women and girls, it is crucial that efforts are rooted in a whole of government approach, and a strengths-based public health-centred policy agenda.

02

Canada

While the proposed Safe Social Media Act (Bill C-34) contains no reference to gender, several of the priority harms (e.g. non-consensual intimate imagery (NCII) and child sexual abuse material (CSAM)) are inherently gendered, while others — such as hate speech, bullying and sexual extortion — provide concrete opportunities for a gendered approach to regulation. Other harms with a gender dimension, such as scams and fraud, are not currently in scope. Mandated platform Digital Safety Plans could provide a window for better understanding the gendered impacts of design features that pose a risk of psychological or physical harm. Beyond online safety, the upcoming Men and Boys' Health and Well-being Strategy provides an important opportunity to ensure that a granular understanding of the gendered impacts of online harms is reflected in public health approaches. Meanwhile there is considerable potential for coordinating responses to gendered online harms across existing frameworks, from gender-based violence, community engagement and prevention of violence, to child protection and fraud prevention.

03

Ireland

Of the analysed jurisdictions, Ireland was found to have the potentially strongest frameworks available to address men's and boys' online harms. This stems from several criminal law instruments, but also reflected health, education and finance frameworks, including the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence 2022-2026, and the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2025-2030, which recognise technology-facilitated abuse and include some commitments focused on men and boys. Ireland also benefits from an online safety framework that combines national law with EU regulation; this offers significant opportunities for further progress by connecting two policy domains that currently operate largely in parallel. As Digital Services Coordinator under the DSA and the regulator under the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, Coimisiún na Meán could explicitly integrate gendered health risks into its supervision of the Online Safety Code and of platforms' DSA systemic risk assessments. The National Men's Health Action Plan 2024–2028, led by Ireland's Health Service Executive, may offer another vehicle for evidence sharing and stakeholder collaboration, to ensure men's health policy reflects the online harms documented in this taxonomy.

A collaboration between

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