The Weekend Essay Technology regulation

How tech turned against women

As AI-generated sexualised images proliferate and app-facilitated abuse spreads, we are sleepwalking into a new age of gender

abuse spreads, we are sleepwalking into a new age of gender inequality. It is time to regulate properly

Laura Bates

Published YESTERDAY

In late December, over the course of just nine days, xAI's Grok tool was used to generate and post online millions of non-consensual intimate images of women. Requests to alter women's images to add bruises, blood and even bullet holes were instantly granted.

Racism was deeply intertwined with the misogyny: Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Zendaya, Cardi B and other prominent politicians and celebrities were targeted with requests to portray them with white skin. A Jewish woman found that an AI image had been created showing her in a bikini standing outside Auschwitz. Millions of the images featured child sexual abuse.

Just a few weeks later, Waymo announced that it plans to debut its driverless cars in London by the end of 2026. These vehicles have been in development for years but will still have to prove that they meet strict safety standards, including protection from misuse via hacking or cyber threats, before being allowed on British roads. By contrast, AI tools that enable the harassment, humiliation, abuse and relentless hounding of women apparently require no such guardrails.

During the past two decades, the Big Tech lobby, well oiled by money and unprecedented proximity to those in positions of power, has done an overwhelmingly successful job of convincing us that regulation in their sector is a near-impossible task. Regulation, the argument goes, is the mortal enemy of innovation. It will strangle creativity, stall progress and may even obliterate the entire industry.

"Overreach of government regulation can pose a grave threat to nascent, promising

"Overreach of government regulation can pose a grave threat to nascent, promising technologies. This is particularly true in the case of AI", read an article published in International Banker late last year, around the same time that Nvidia, the company creating AI data chips, reached a record market capitalisation of more than $5tn and became the most valuable company in the world.

Grok is just the tip of the iceberg. So-called 'nudify' tools, enabling men to abuse women at the click of a button, continue to flood search engines and app stores

The result is that we are sleepwalking into a new age of gender inequality, propelled at breathtaking speed by the implementation of untested AI tools. The explosion of non-consensual deepfake pornography and app-facilitated sexual abuse is merely one aspect of a tech revolution that is reshaping women's lives. Less well publicised — although no less prolific — are the ways in which existing forms of inequality and discrimination are being repeated and intensified by tools that have been trained on biased or misleading data. From sex to healthcare, education and criminal justice, new technologies are enabling the amplification of ancient patterns of gendered power and abuse.

Women make up just 12 per cent of AI researchers and female founders receive only 2 per cent of venture capital funding. We are not the ones building this new world. But we will have no choice about living in it.

The situation feels particularly bleak in the wake of the release of millions of documents pertaining to the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and his associates. It is hard to confront the scale of Epstein's abuse of power. But it reveals the ways in which unseen networks of male-dominated wealth, power and influence allow misogyny to flourish. We cannot simply trust that there is some invisible system of checks and balances in place.

Part of the problem, of course, is that we are still playing catch-up. In the past year,

lawmakers around the world have tried to curb some of the most egregious harms enacted using AI tools.



Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, centre, flanked by Paris Hilton, left, and Republican congresswoman Laurel Lee, right, speaks in support of the Defiance Act at the US Capitol in Washington, January 22 © Getty Images

Ocasio-Cortez and other activists and lawmakers from across the political spectrum are currently campaigning for the passage of the Defiance Act, which would allow victims of non-consensual sexual AI deepfakes to sue creators and distributors of such material for damages.

In the UK, the government has brought into force a new law criminalising the creation of such images, and this week Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced a change that will require AI chatbots to abide by illegal content duties as part of the Online Safety Act.

But these responses are too often piecemeal, reactive and riddled with loopholes.

Part of the reluctance to legislate stems from the notion that the potential harms are intangible. What exists online, many people believe, has few real-world consequences.

If a sexualised image isn't real, then how significant can the impact really be? The abuse meted out via Grok, many will argue, while grim, does not justify wide-reaching regulation that will constrain the entire sector.

Grok, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. So-called "nudify" tools, enabling men to abuse women at the click of a button, continue to flood search engines and app stores, with research from the Tech Transparency Project finding that more than 100 such apps were available on the Google Play Store or Apple App Store in early 2026. Analytics provider AppMagic estimated that those apps had been downloaded some 705mn times worldwide and generated $117mn in revenue. The tech giants take a cut of their revenue, therefore actively profiting from the abuse of women and girls that such apps facilitate. Both companies told CNBC they had removed or suspended some apps from their stores after the investigation.

In researching these kinds of tools during the past two years, I have seen first-hand just how devastating their impact can be. On schoolgirls who have dropped out of education altogether after becoming targets. Young women who have developed PTSD that will affect them for the rest of their lives. Women who have been at risk of losing custody of their children. Women who have been forced out of their jobs. Women at risk of so-called "honour"-based violence as a result of deepfake images. Children who have been blackmailed by other children threatening to release more images if they do not perform sexual acts. The proliferation of AI-generated rape and child sexual abuse material serving endlessly to normalise and fetishise these crimes.

Yes, the harm is real.

During the past few months, deeply concerning accounts have emerged from women who have been covertly filmed by men using "smart glasses"'. Described by Meta as "AI glasses", the latest versions feature built-in tools that generate real-time information about what the wearer is looking at. Feminist organisations have already raised the alarm about the possibility of such technology being abused to identify

women and reveal personal information about them.

Around the world, women have described the derogatory and abusive comments they received after videos of them were filmed and released online, often on monetised accounts, without their knowledge or consent. According to a BBC investigation, hundreds of such videos had been posted on TikTok and Instagram, apparently "filmed secretly — using Meta smart glasses". Meta responded that it would "continually review opportunities to enhance our AI glasses, informed by customer feedback and ongoing research".



A demonstration against deepfake abuse in Seoul, September 2024 © Associated Press

A woman in Ireland was granted a temporary protection order after describing how her controlling and abusive ex-partner would use Meta smart glasses to record constant video footage of her, as part of a broader campaign of domestic abuse. In another case, a man was fined after using a pair of smart glasses to record sex with a woman without her consent.

These were not isolated incidents. Until AI tools are released with safety-by-design

guardrails built in, there will be men who use them for violently misogynistic purposes. A user of Google's Veo 3 video generator used the tool to create graphic clips of women pleading for their lives before being shot dead, and uploaded them to YouTube. "Captured girls shot in head", one video was titled. "Japanese schoolgirls shot in breast", read another. YouTube removed the channel for breaching its terms of service, but only after reporters alerted the platform, by which time the videos had already racked up hundreds of thousands of views.

Meanwhile, the response from Big Tech tells us everything about the current status quo.

Last month, as public outcry grew over the abusive images of women and children generated by xAI's Grok, Elon Musk's company initially chose not to disable the feature but instead to restrict its usage to paying subscribers, thus actively monetising the abuse instead of acting to curb it.

Grok's ability to provide users with sexualised deepfakes was later restricted by xAI in response to legislative threats from around the world. Still, the confidence of the initial response says everything about the degree of impunity enjoyed by Big Tech, and by those who use its products to abuse. They are right to be confident. Millions of women have been victimised. The vast majority of their abusers face no consequences.

Meta has been actively rowing back on its moderation teams. In January 2025, the company announced it would "dramatically reduce" what it described as "censorship" across its platforms, replacing fact-checkers with "community notes" and getting rid of "a bunch of restrictions on topics like immigration and gender that are just out of touch with mainstream discourse". The company's own oversight board criticised the changes, saying they had been carried out hastily with no transparency around whether any due diligence had been carried out on the potential human rights impact.

Another outcry ensued when Reuters reported that it had obtained an internal Meta

Platforms document detailing the company's policies on its AI chatbot behaviour, which it said permitted the bots to "engage a child in conversations that are romantic or sensual". Meta confirmed the document's authenticity but said that after receiving questions from Reuters it had "removed portions which stated it is permissible for chatbots to flirt and engage in romantic roleplay with children". Which raises the question: what if the document hadn't been exposed by the press?

This is the consequence of failing to enact regulation to ensure safety before AI tools are released. Unimaginably wealthy companies choosing to expose their most vulnerable users to significant potential harm in the pursuit of profit. Destructive and potentially abusive tools only begrudgingly altered or quietly withdrawn if someone happens to find out and make a big enough fuss about it. Harm done first, partial solutions hinted at later.

As governments around the world scrambled to respond to the outpouring of millions of abusive images from Grok, Musk shared a post claiming that the "popularity and real-world usage" of Grok were "skyrocketing globally". Abuse, it seems, is good for business. Which is exactly why regulation is essential.

As fewer women use AI, fewer will feel qualified to contribute to its design, and more will be affected by the inevitable job losses it accelerates. The vicious circle continues

Only a preventive approach will avoid the collateral damage that we are already seeing inflicted on the most vulnerable in our society. But it is also crucial that regulation is not restricted to technology that is deliberately designed to facilitate harassment. Repeated examples continue to demonstrate how even AI tools with supposedly innocuous aims risk perpetuating bias if they are not sufficiently tested before release.

A study in Germany revealed that large language models such as ChatGPT were

consistently advising women to ask for lower salaries than men in recruitment processes, even when both had identical qualifications. In one case, where identical prompts were given to the chatbot, apart from the gender of the applicant, it suggested a disparity of more than $100,000 in the annual salaries they were advised to request.

In the UK, research by the London School of Economics revealed that AI tools already in use by more than half of England's councils were downplaying women's medical conditions, potentially resulting in unequal care provision.

Experts have repeatedly warned that AI tools used in recruitment may actively discriminate against female applicants, as well as candidates wearing headscarves and those with "Black-sounding names". Yet a University of Melbourne study found that 42 per cent of global companies are already using predictive AI systems in recruitment, with that figure set to grow significantly during the next few years.

AI models built to predict liver disease from blood tests were twice as likely to miss the disease in women as in men, according to a UCL study. The lead author warned: "AI algorithms are increasingly used in hospitals to assist doctors in diagnosing patients. Our study shows that, unless these algorithms are investigated for bias, they may only help a subset of patients, leaving other groups with worse care."

A study by Women's World Banking found that credit-scoring AI systems employed by global financial service providers are likely to discriminate against women, which risks excluding them from loans and other financial services, thereby exacerbating the already severe $17bn global gender credit gap.

Considered individually, these cases are concerning. Together, they should present a chilling warning. The misogyny being rapidly reinvented and amplified by thousands of AI tools represents a dangerous feedback loop.





Meta chief executive Mark Zuckerberg introduces the Meta Oakley Vanguard AI glasses in Menlo Park, California, last September © Bloomberg

Already, as bias and abuse make such tools less safe and enjoyable for women, dramatically fewer women report uptake of AI in their day-to-day lives. As fewer women use AI, fewer will feel qualified to contribute to its design, and more will be affected by the inevitable job losses it accelerates. The vicious circle continues.

A Channel 4 news investigation in 2024 revealed that more than 30 female UK politicians had been victimised by deepfake image abuse, a number likely to have risen since. A number of high-profile female politicians have cited abuse as a factor when deciding to step down from politics, and it is likely to put others off running in the first place, in turn leaving a more male-dominated political ruling class to make crucial decisions about AI regulation. We are tumbling into a downward spiral that risks accelerating the already alarming regression of women's rights worldwide.

All this could look very different. Carefully crafted international frameworks for tech-positive regulation would bolster healthy innovation and growth while maintaining ethical standards. Such regulation should include human oversight and auditing of tools, dataset sampling, accountability and transparency, minimum standards for safety-by-design guardrails and the opportunity to ensure that tools are compliant with a human rights framework before release.

Other sectors have shown us that well-designed regulation can in fact boost growth and uptake. As Baroness Martha Lane Fox recently wrote: “Clear, targeted oversight builds trust, accelerates adoption, and anchors sustainable growth. Smart rules boost market confidence and draw in investors who might otherwise stay away□.□.□.□ Research consistently shows that economies grow when consumers are protected.”

None of this is out of reach. But with some administrations moving in lockstep with Big Tech, taking action will require political bravery. Governments owe it to more than half of their populations to show such leadership. There are billions of dollars being invested globally in the belief that AI represents a brilliant new future, which must be pursued at all costs. At present, for women and girls, that promise is a lie.

Laura Bates is the author of ‘The New Age of Sexism’ (Simon & Schuster)

Find out about our latest stories first — follow FT Weekend on Instagram, Bluesky and X, and sign up to receive the FT Weekend newsletter every Saturday morning

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Gender politics

Technology regulation

Big Tech

Artificial intelligence

FT Edit