

## Intimate image abuse in adults and under 18s: A comparative analysis of cases dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline and Professionals Online Safety Helpline

### Aims

This report forms part of a collaboration between the University of Exeter, the Revenge Porn Helpline and Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH), based at South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL). The Revenge Porn Helpline supports adults who have had their intimate images shared without their consent (intimate image abuse), and POSH supports members of the children's workforce in dealing with all aspects of online abuse and safeguarding, including intimate image abuse. The aim of this report was to investigate any connections between intimate image abuse in adults and under 18s, including effects on victims and perpetrator motivations.

### Key Findings

#### The Revenge Porn Helpline

- Broadly two types of cases were dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline: 'sextortion' where the perpetrator financially blackmailed the victim and 'intimate image abuse' where the perpetrator shared or threatened to share intimate images, for social, psychological or interpersonal reasons.
- The majority of cases dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline were from female callers (73%). The majority of these women were victims of intimate image abuse (97%) as opposed to sextortion (3%). The majority of male callers were victims of sextortion (90%) as opposed to intimate image abuse (10%).
- Impacts also differed according to gender. On the whole, male sextortion victims carried little shame and self-blame and were able to quickly move on from their experiences. On the contrary, female victims of intimate image abuse experienced a great deal of shame and self-blame, suffered lasting social and emotional impacts and described their experiences as sexually violating.
- Intimate image abuse is overwhelming perpetrated by male ex-partners, who can be further categorised into two distinct types. Type one perpetrators are ex-partners from months, or even years ago. They share images anonymously on large pornography sites, with motivations largely unknown. Type two perpetrators are very recent ex-partners. They display a long history of abusive and controlling behaviour towards their victims and their threats to share images are but one part of this much broader pattern.

#### The Professionals Online Safety Helpline

- Surprisingly, only 4% of POSH cases dealt with intimate image abuse. This indicates either a lack of awareness in young people or a failure in communication between young people and professionals regarding intimate image abuse.
- Despite the lack of intimate image abuse, POSH dealt with two distinct types of cyberbullying, which could be seen to mimic attributes of type one and two intimate image abuse, respectively. Type one cyberbullying involved an anonymous social media profile, multiple perpetrators, the exchange of humiliating memes, and victims who discovered the abuse inadvertently; type two cyberbullying involved one-on-one bullying as part of a broader pattern of abuse, wherein the perpetrator had an existing relationship with the victim.

- Professionals appeared unaware of the parallels between cyberbullying and intimate image abuse and, as such, cyberbullying incidents, particularly type one, were not always handled with due seriousness.

### Policy Context

The current laws surrounding intimate image abuse should be altered in order to acknowledge this crime as a gendered, sexual offence. Furthermore, 'the intention to cause distress' should not be required as a prerequisite for prosecuting perpetrators of intimate image abuse. Policy-makers should aim to raise awareness and encourage disclosures of intimate image abuse between young people and the professionals that care for them. Policy should also address the parallels between cyberbullying in young people and intimate image abuse in adults, so as to prevent problematic online behaviours from escalating.

### Methodology

This project was based on a comparative, qualitative analysis of cases dealt with by the Revenge Porn and Professionals Online Safety Helpline. Four months of call and email case notes were sampled from each helpline for analysis. Individual contacts to the helplines formed the unit of analysis for this project. Data was collected and analysed simultaneously using a thematic, inductive approach.

### Background

In 2015 a law was introduced criminalising the non-consensual disclosure of private sexual material (Criminal Justice and Courts Act, 2015). This law has been critiqued on two grounds. Firstly, it classifies the disclosure of intimate material as a communications offence, meaning that victims who report to the police are not granted anonymity from the media as they would be if this crime was classified as a sexual offence. Secondly, it requires 'with the intention to cause distress' in order to prosecute. Although intimate image abuse in under 18s falls under a different law, this age group are noted to be most vulnerable to this type of abuse, alongside other online abuses, such as grooming and cyberbullying. Despite this, there is relatively little understanding of the connections between patterns of victimisation and perpetration of all types of online abuse in under 18s, and these vulnerabilities and behaviours in adulthood.

**Source** <https://swgfl.org.uk/research/intimate-image-abuse-in-adults-and-under-18s> (published July 2019)

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