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

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Executive Summary

Intimate image abuse (or revenge porn as it is colloquially known) is a crime that has exponentially increased with the advent of the Internet, with thousands of adults now becoming victims (Uhl, Rhyner, Terrance & Lugo, 2018). In 2015 a law was introduced criminalising the non-consensual disclosure of private sexual material (Criminal Justice and Courts Act, 2015). Whilst this legislation is largely a positive thing, it has, nevertheless, been critiqued for failing to adequately represent the patterns of victimisation and perpetration that surround this crime.

Intimate image abuse not only affects adults but children also. Under 18s are noted to be the group most vulnerable to intimate image abuse, alongside other online abuses, such as grooming and cyberbullying (Barter, McCarry, Berridge & Evans, 2009; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012). Despite this, there is relatively little understanding of the connections between patterns of victimisation and perpetration of intimate image abuse in under 18s, and these vulnerabilities and behaviours in adulthood.

This report forms part of a collaboration between the University of Exeter, the Revenge Porn Helpline and the 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, and POSH supports members of the children's workforce in dealing with all aspects of online abuse and safeguarding. This report investigates the gaps in existing knowledge surrounding intimate image abuse by examining connections between the issues dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH.

This research finds that v**ictims of intimate image abuse are disproportionately female** and that **the impacts of intimate image abuse are highly gendered.** It also finds that **two types of perpetrators of intimate image abuse exist.** Type one perpetrators share images anonymously on large pornography sites, with motivations largely unknown, and type two perpetrators use threats to share images as part of a broader pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. Both types are predominately male. These patterns of victimisation and perpetration support the need for the current intimate image abuse law to be adjusted.

This research also reveals that **POSH dealt with a surprising lack of intimate image abuse cases in under 18s.** This absence would appear to indicate that a lack of communication surrounding intimate image abuse is occurring between young people and professionals. Despite the lack of intimate image abuse, **POSH frequently dealt with two distinct types of cyberbullying perpetration, which could be seen to mimic attributes of type one and two intimate image abuse, respectively.** These similarities were not acknowledged by professionals and, as such, cyberbullying incidents were not always handled with due seriousness. This indicates a need to raise awareness of intimate image abuse, and other associated behaviours, in both young people and the professionals that care for them.

Introduction

Since the advent of the internet issues of online safety, privacy and abuse have been of central concern (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn & Hughes 2009; Livingstone, Stoilova & Nandagiri, 2018). Despite awareness of the dangers, the revolutionary potential of the Internet is also widely acknowledged and celebrated (Lange, 2014; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Miller, 2011). In order to minimise the harm and enhance the benefits of Internet use, numerous organisations now exist, including UK Safer Internet Centre, Childnet International and the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF).

South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) is a charitable trust based in Exeter, working in partnership with these organisations. They specialise in the provision of services and tools designed to support the safe and secure use of digital technology. As part of their work, SWGfL operate two helplines: the Revenge Porn Helpline, which supports adults who have had their intimate images shared without their consent, and the Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH), which supports members of the children's workforce in dealing with all aspects of online abuse and safeguarding.

This report is based upon a comparative analysis of the data collected by the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH. Its primary objective is to investigate any potential connections between the types of issues dealt with on these two helplines and to explore how these insights can be used to inform future conversations. This study was undertaken as part of a PhD secondment in collaboration with the University of Exeter and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Revenge Porn

Revenge Porn is a colloquial term that refers to the sharing of an individual's sexually explicit images or videos without their consent. Threats to share material are also covered under this term (Citron & Franks, 2014; Franks, 2015). Revenge Porn can be carried out by hackers or criminal gangs who use sexually explicit content to financially blackmail victims (also termed 'sextortion'). Most commonly, however, Revenge Porn takes place following the dissolution of a romantic relationship as a way in which to control the victim or 'punish' her for leaving (Burris, 2014; Stroud, 2014).

Whilst in popular use, the term 'Revenge Porn' is considered by many to be outdated in that it misrepresents victims as 'deserving' and fails to acknowledge the sexually abusive nature of this act (Maddocks, 2018). As such, various terms, including non-consensual pornography (Uh et al, 2018), image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017) and non-consensual dissemination of intimate images (Maddocks, 2019), have been proposed as alternatives. Intimate image abuse (the term favoured by the Revenge Porn Helpline practitioners) is used throughout this report.

Whilst intimate image abuse is not a new phenomenon, within recent years it has exponentially increased (McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017; Uhl et al, 2018). This is largely due to the emergence of the Internet and digital technologies, which have both

normalised the exchange of sexually explicit material and increased the ease with which it can be distributed (Uhl et al, 2018). Further to this, many pornography sites now exist, which are entirely devoted to hosting and facilitating intimate image abuse (Morris, 2012; Uhl et al, 2018). Intimate image abuse is increasingly being recognised as an extremely concerning online behaviour, with severe and long-lasting effects on mental health and professional reputation (Bates, 2016; Cecil, 2014; Citron and Franks 2014, Kopf 2013).

In 2015, following increased public awareness, the Criminal Justice and Courts Act (in England and Wales) made it 'an offence for a person to disclose a private sexual photograph or film' if the disclosure is 'made without the consent of the individual who appears in the photograph or film', and 'with the intention of causing that individual distress' (Criminal Justice and Courts Act, 2015). In 2017 the Sentencing Council included the 'threat to disclose intimate material or sexually explicit images' under the Communications Act 2003 (Sentencing Council, 2017).

Whilst these laws represent a positive step forward, they have been critiqued (Henry & Powell, 2017). Critiques have focused on how the disclosure of intimate material is classified 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 (Henry & Powell, 2017). The risk of being publically named during the course of justice is described as a huge barrier preventing victims from coming forward (BBC News, 2018).

In response to these critiques researchers and advocates have begun to highlight how the impacts of intimate image abuse are extremely similar to the impacts of other sexual offences such as rape and sexual harassment (Bates, 2017; Cecil, 2014; Patella-Rey, 2018). Alongside this, the intrinsically gendered nature of intimate image abuse has been highlighted, with the intention of drawing attention to how it forms part of a much broader spectrum of male sexual violence against women (Citron & Franks, 2014; Franks, 2011; Kelly, 1988; McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017; Powell, 2010). These arguments support the need for intimate image abuse to be re-classified as a sexual offence; however, more qualitative studies into how gender intersects with intimate image abuse are needed if these observations are to be incorporated into the law.

The law surrounding intimate image abuse has also been critiqued for the way in which it requires 'with the intention to cause distress' in order to prosecute (Huber, 2018; Lord, 2018). Advocates have argued that this requirement completely overlooks the way in which 'distress' would, in all likelihood, be an inevitable outcome of having intimate material shared, whether intended or not (Huber, 2018; Lord, 2018). Further to this, attention has been drawn to how numerous other factors can be seen to motivate perpetrators of this crime, including sexist ideology (Pina, Holland, & James, 2017), financial gain (Morris, 2012) and the assertion of masculinity amongst peer groups (Hall & Hearn, 2019). As such, more research is needed, in this case into the perpetrators of intimate image abuse, in order to enhance understandings of the intentions behind this crime and incorporate them into legislation.

Online safety and young people

Online privacy and abuse are issues which not only affect adults but, even more significantly, children and adolescents. Since the advent of the internet, much attention has been paid to the dangers of children's unregulated use of technology and how this can give way to grooming, sexual exploitation or exposure to harmful content such as pornography, violence and extremism (Barter et al, 2009; Dimonte & Ricchiuto, 2006; Rothman, Kaczmarsky, Burke, Jansen & Baughman, 2015). Alongside this, young people's digital interactions with each other have become a cause for concern and debates surrounding the nature, prevalence and implications of behaviours such as cyberbullying and 'sexting' are ongoing (Barter et al, 2009; Delmonico, 2008; Ditch the Label, 2018; Englander, Donnerstein, Kowalski, Lin, & Parti, 2017; Korenis & Billick, 2014; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder & Lattanner, 2014; Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2011).

As the law currently stands, individuals under the age of 18 cannot be criminalised for intimate image abuse under the 2015 law described above. Instead, *any* distribution of a sexualised image containing a child automatically falls under the offence of 'sharing an indecent image of a minor' (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). This is a very serious crime which technically anyone can be charged with, even if they are under 18 themselves and have shared the image consensually. Thankfully, it is largely recognised as ill-advised to criminalise children in this way and, in reality, it is rarely done (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2016).

Regardless of the lack of criminalisation, much attention has still been paid to the sharing of intimate images between young people, whether consensually ('sexting' (Colenbrander, 2016; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011) or non-consensually (in this report referred to as intimate image abuse). In regards to consensual sexting, studies have examined whether this behaviour should be considered a normal part of adolescent exploration (Burkett, 2015; Ringrose et al, 2012) or a more harmful phenomenon with the potential to escalate into serious sexual harassment and abuse (Brown & L'engle 2009; Stanley, Barter, Wood, Aghtaie, Larkins, Lanau & Overlien, 2018). In regards to intimate image abuse in young people, studies indicate that under 18s are much more likely to become victims of intimate image abuse than any other age group, either on its own or in conjunction with other types of interpersonal relationship abuse (Barter et al, 2009; Ringrose et al, 2012; Setty, 2019; Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013).

Whilst these findings are important, comparatively little is known about whether sharing intimate images at a young age (consensually or not) might evolve into more worrying or even criminal patterns of online victimisation and perpetration later in life (see Salter, Crofts & Murray, 2013 for a notable exception). If the further proliferation of intimate image abuse is to be prevented, then a greater awareness of the connection between this behaviour in young people and in adults is needed.

Project outline and research questions

This report was carried out in collaboration with South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL), the Revenge Porn Helpline and the Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH). As part of their

service, the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH respond to telephone and email contacts, providing advice, practical support and signposting. Whilst both helplines collate basic quantitative data, no qualitative analysis has been carried out on the more detailed case notes they record. Furthermore, and although the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH teams work in close conjunction, their individual data sets have never been comparatively analysed.

Practitioners on both helplines are aware of the issues outlined thus far in this report, and, because of this, they have long recognised a need for qualitative, comparative research to be carried on their two data-sets. This project was thus designed with this objective in mind. In studying both the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH data sets, it addresses the following questions:

1. Who are the adult victims of intimate image abuse and how does it impact them?
2. Who are the adult perpetrators of intimate image abuse and what are their intentions?
3. Are there any similarities or differences between adult intimate image abuse cases, as dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline, versus under 18 intimate image abuse cases, as dealt with by POSH?
4. What can we learn from these similarities or differences?

Methodology

Research was carried out between March 2019 and May 2019 and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of a University of Exeter PhD secondment. The Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH collate email contacts and call notes on a secure database. The Revenge Porn Helpline data dates back to mid-2016 and POSH data dates back to the beginning of 2018. This project randomly sampled one month from each year of available Revenge Porn Helpline data (4 months in total) and 2 months from each year of available POSH data (4 months in total). This sample was selected to provide both chronological scope and sufficient depth, and to ensure that analysis of each helpline was equally weighted. Individual contacts to each helpline (e.g. emails or call notes) formed the unit of analysis for this project. Some contacts from both the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH data were excluded on the grounds of irrelevance or incoherence.

Data was collected and analysed simultaneously using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). RQDA software was used in the development of themes and organisation of concepts. Because both helplines adhere to strict codes of confidentiality, all data presented in this report is anonymised and, where necessary, quotes have been lightly edited to obscure identifying details.

A note on terminology: in results and discussion of the Revenge Porn Helpline data, the term 'sextortion' refers to cases where the perpetrator financially blackmailed the victim with threats to share their intimate material. The term 'intimate image abuse' refers to cases where the perpetrator shared or threatened to share intimate images, for social, psychological or interpersonal reasons (to be discussed), as opposed to financial. This distinction follows that made by helpline practitioners who recognise that, whilst sextortion and intimate image abuse are similar, they are fundamentally different crimes and should be categorised as such.

Results 1: The Revenge Porn Helpline

Overview

The majority of cases dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline were from female callers (73%) (*Figure 1*). The majority of these women were victims of intimate image abuse (230) as opposed to sextortion (6). The majority of male callers were victims of sextortion (57) as opposed to intimate image abuse (6) (*Figure 2*).

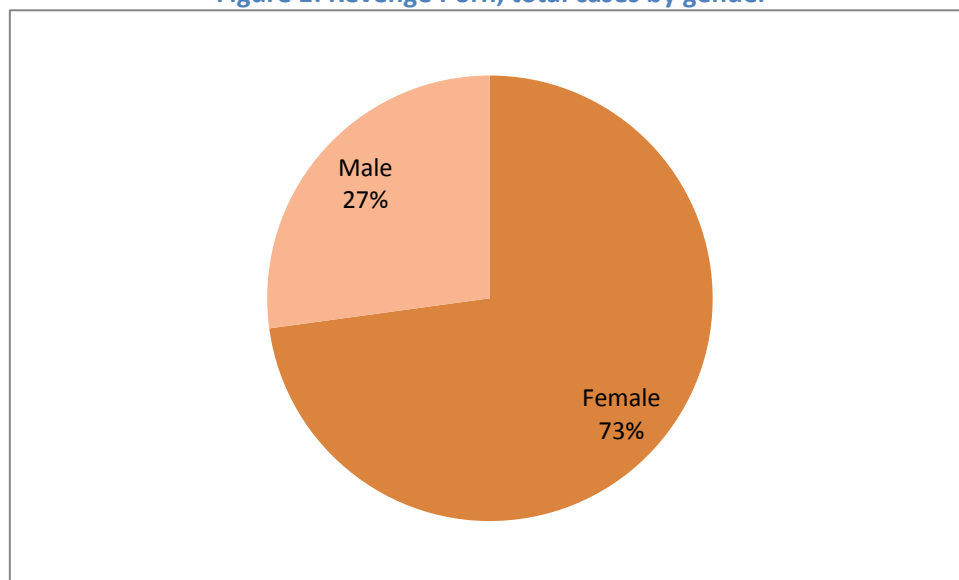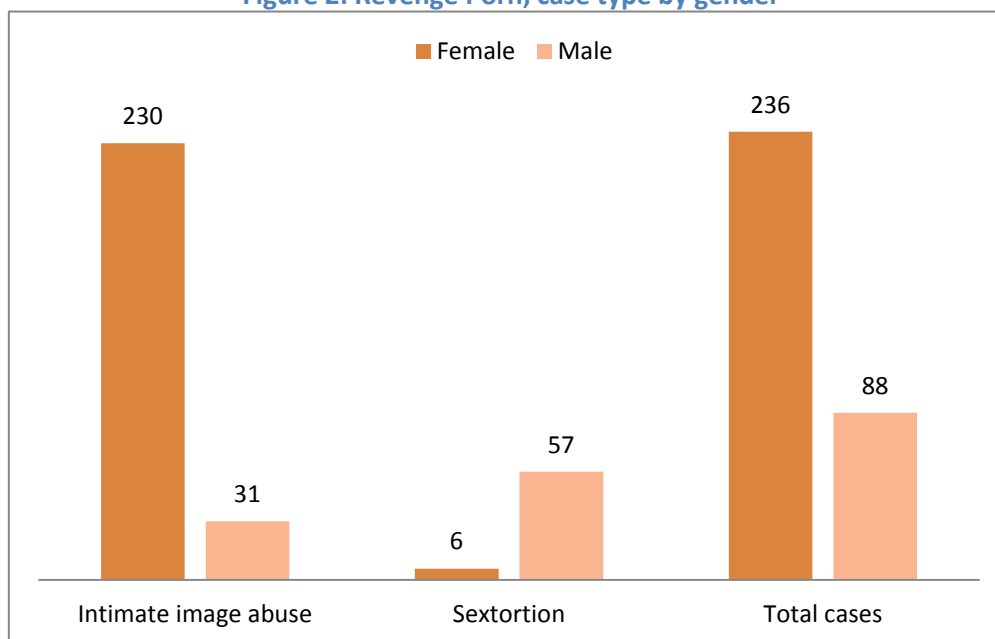**Figure 1: Revenge Porn, total cases by gender**

Male
27%

Female
73%

Figure 2: Revenge Porn, case type by gender

■ Female   ■ Male

230

31

6

57

236

88

Intimate image abuse   Sextortion   Total cases

Intimate image abuse (female)

Two distinct 'types' of intimate image abuse were identified which could be differentiated by nature, perpetrator, police reporting experiences, impacts, interpretations and long-term outcomes. 41% of women experienced 'type one' intimate image abuse and 43% experienced 'type two' intimate image abuse. A third intimate image abuse experience (the remaining 16%) did not explicitly fall into type one or two but contained a patchwork of elements from each (*Figure 3*).

Type one intimate image abuse

Nature of abuse

Victims of type one intimate image abuse contacted the helpline after having had their images or videos shared on either public pornography sites or forums specifically set up for exchanging intimate images of women (for example sub-threads of 4chan or Reddit). Occasionally the victim's personal information (including her full name, location, and non-intimate images) was also disclosed. The victim nearly always found out about type one intimate image abuse *inadvertently;* she was alerted by a 'friend' or tipped off by an anonymous contact. By the time the victim had been alerted, it was common for her images to have been re-shared numerous times, on multiple forums.

Perpetrator

The identity of the perpetrator of type one intimate image abuse could rarely be deduced with 100% certainty. However, it could often be narrowed down to a specific male ex-partner (the only one in possession of the images in question). Type one intimate image abuse was discovered months, or even years, after the victim and suspected perpetrator had broken up. Often the victim hadn't been in contact with her ex-partner during this time and their relationship and separation was rarely described as hostile. Because of this, the intimate image abuse appeared to come out of the blue.

Police experiences

38% of type one intimate image abuse victims told helpline practitioners that they reported to the police. The remaining 62% either did not discuss a police report or explicitly stated that they had chosen not to report. Victims who did not report described fear of judgment as preventing them. Of the victims who did report, 31% described a positive police experience and 69% described a negative or unfavourable experience (*Figure 6*).

Positive police experiences coincided with the victim being taken seriously and the incident being further investigated. A great deal of negative police experiences were directly related to the nature of this type of abuse. For example, the police appeared to have little awareness that it was crime. Victims were told:

> *'This isn't a crime if you can't say for certain that it was your ex that did it'*

'This isn't a crime because the site is hosted outside the UK'

'This isn't a crime because there is lots of other porn on this site'.

Because of this lack of awareness, the police were dismissive of this type of abuse. Victims were told that their abuse *'wasn't that serious'* or *'wasn't as bad as offline abuse'*.

Unfavourable police outcomes were also related to the perpetrator denying his involvement in the abuse, which he was able to do due to its anonymous nature. This led to unwillingness on the behalf of the police to investigate further. One victim told the helpline:

'I reported him straight away to the police. He said to the police that he doesn't have any pictures of me. They believed him and nobody has checked his mobile or computer'.

Victims also experienced more general negative police responses, for example feeling blamed for their abuse. One victim said:

'I was left feeling judged and was made to feel that it was my own fault that it had happened'.

Impacts

Type one intimate image abuse significantly impacted the victim's mental health. Mental health impacts were also intrinsically related to the nature of this crime. Victims experienced a loss of control related to the fact that their images had been shared widely and continued to be so. Victims told the helpline:

'I feel like this situation is out of my hands. I'm suffering from really bad anxiety. I can't sleep properly at night…I just want it to all go away I feel like it's going to follow me and haunt me forever!'

In attempts to take back control, victims commonly spent huge amounts of time searching for their images online, trying to get them removed. Conversely, this increased anxiety.

The fact that their images existed in public, anonymous spaces also led victims to feel vulnerable and exposed. One victim told the helpline:

'My stomach is like fist, I wake up a couple of times in the night with nightmares, whoever smiles at me on the street, my first thought is whether they saw, whether they know'.

Victims also experienced a profound sense of violation, particularly when they considered that hundreds of men might have used their images for sexual arousal. Victims told the helpline:

'I think about all the men that have seen (the images) and it feels like they have had my body over and over again…It feels disgusting'.

The public nature of this type of intimate image abuse meant that it held the potential to negatively impact victims socially and professionally. Victims were terrified of family, friends, or worst still, employers, discovering their images online. One victim told the helpline:

'I feel like I am just waiting for the day that my school/parents/ students discover my issue and I lose my teaching license and reputation because of it all'.

Finally, this type one intimate image abuse commonly paved the way for further abuse to take place. Because images were posted on public forums, often with personal information accompanying them, a number of victims were subject to harassment, both on and offline, and physical and sexual assaults from men who recognised them from their images. One victim told the helpline:

'I was assaulted by a man on a night out. When my friends asked him why he did it he said he recognised me from videos he had been watching on porn sites'.

Interpretations

Very rarely did the victims of type one intimate image abuse describe themselves as wrongfully harmed victims of their perpetrator's criminal actions. Neither did they express anger or injustice. Instead, they blamed themselves and carried a great degree of shame. As one victim wrote:

'I'm so ashamed of what I did all those years ago…I feel so ashamed and embarrassed of myself for doing such a stupid thing when I was younger'.

Outcomes

The Revenge Porn Helpline did an effective job assisting type one intimate image abuse victims in the removal of their images from porn sites. Nevertheless, in a number of cases, full removal of images could not be achieved. This was due to the sheer ubiquity of image sharing, in combination with site hosts' failure to co-operate with image removal. As a result, some victims of this type of abuse never received closure, despite considerable effort, and they had to live with the fact that their images still remained on the web. One victim told the helpline:

'(This has been going on) for nearly 10 years. I originally had around 62 images uploaded online, these images spread very quickly through adult image platforms. To date there have been 8166 URLs displaying my images…I am still living with the consequences of my ex's actions to this day'.

Type two intimate image abuse

Nature of abuse

Victims of type two intimate image abuse contacted the helpline after receiving threats that their intimate images would be shared (as opposed to their images already having been shared). The perpetrator was almost always a male ex-partner and his threats were made directly to the victim. The perpetrator usually threatened to share the victim's images on a social media platform with her family and friends, rather than on a porn site with other anonymous male users. Occasionally the perpetrator followed through on his threats, however, more commonly he did not and instead simply used the victim's images to control and harass her.

Perpetrator

Given the directly threatening nature of this type of abuse, the identity of the perpetrator was never unclear; he was almost always a very recent ex-partner. His threats were usually instigated by a specific event, such as the victim ending the relationship. The victim commonly described her relationship with the perpetrator as having been controlling and abusive in other ways (physically, emotionally, sexually or financially). Occasionally the images themselves had been taken without the victim's knowledge or consent (voyeurism) or they depicted non-consensual activity (rape or sexual assault). One victim told the helpline:

> *'(My ex-partner) has always been abusive, evil and violent towards me…I've been subject to his verbal abuse. He hit me a lot of times even breaking my nose. (He) cheated on me and smashed items in my flat…He's always made threats that I'm never to go with anyone else ever. On a few occasions he took photos of me in various state of undress/during sexual contact - AGAINST my will and knowledge and now he is threatening to share them'.*

As is apparent, this type of intimate image abuse is merely the tip of a much bigger iceberg.

Police experiences

21% of victims of this type two intimate image abuse told helpline practitioners that they had reported the threats to share their images to the police. The remaining 79% either did not discuss a police report or explicitly stated that they had chosen not to report. Victims who did not report described a number of reasons for this. Like type one victims they described fear of judgment. They also described reasons directly linked to the perpetrator, for example not wanting to get him in trouble or a fear of retaliation. One victim wrote:

> *'I'm afraid to go to the police, I'm afraid of what he might do…when I told him I'm going to the police etc. he told me he will destroy my life if I do'.*

Of the victims who did report, 33% described a positive police experience and 67% described a negative or unfavourable experience (*Figure 6*). Positive police experiences coincided with the victim's reports being taken seriously and further investigated. Negative

experiences were related to the police ignoring the wider context of abuse and even, at times, siding with the perpetrator. Victims told the helpline:

> '*I have recently been to the police to ask them for help…all they have done is gone to him and told him to leave me alone…they seem to work very politely towards him as it was him who has more rights than me*'.

> '*They seem to think this isn't that bad and just a couple's row*'.

Sadly, failure to take incidents seriously or acknowledge the perpetrator's abuse was not isolated. Victims of type two intimate image abuse described a long history of police neglect and mistreatment concerning other incidents of domestic violence.

Impacts

Victims of type two intimate image abuse often had mental health issues as a result of their abusive relationships, including depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders and PTSD. The intimate image abusive exacerbated these long-standing issues. One victim told the helpline:

> '*I can feel myself slipping back to the way I was (when I was with him) thinking about hurting myself again*'.

Victims also described being afraid of their abusive partners. This fear was, again, exacerbated by the intimate image abuse. Victims told the helpline:

> '*He was violent. He still poses risk to my safety…I still worry about my safety but now (after the intimate image abuse) even more so*'.

> '*I feel fear that if I anger him he will post them. He is using this as a way to control me. He is quite hard to read and I am deeply affected by him, I am scared of him*'.

Similarly to victims of type one intimate image abuse, victims of type two intimate image abuse described feeling violated. This violation was layered on top of the violation they had already experienced in relation to other types of sexual violence inflicted on them by their perpetrators. One victim told the helpline:

> '*He forced me to do so many things sexually with him and then forced me to send these images. It all feels so disgusting. I am humiliated*'.

Finally, because of the controlling nature of their relationships, victims often had little social support. This meant that they were unable to seek help from family and friends and they struggled with the impacts of intimate image abuse in insolation.

Interpretation

Victims of type two intimate image abuse were similar to victims of type one abuse in that they rarely described themselves as wrongfully harmed and, instead, blamed themselves. Victims told the helpline:

'I'm mortified by my complete lack of judgement…I am mortified about even getting myself into this situation'.

'I am very ashamed of myself. I am so upset and disappointed in myself...I feel like a complete and utter idiot'.

Outcomes

Because type two intimate image abuse was threat based, it often didn't involve images actually being shared. The first line of action for helpline practitioners dealing with this type of victim was to reassure them of this fact. Furthermore, and in instances when images *were* shared, they were largely done so on social media platforms. Helpline practitioners experienced much higher levels of co-operation from these platforms regarding image removal (as compared to pornography sites), and, because of this, they were able to prevent type one intimate image abuse from escalating. The apparent quick and easy resolution of this type of abuse is, however, dangerously misleading. As discussed, type two intimate image abuse was just one aspect of a much broader pattern of intimate partner abuse. As such, impacts on the victims' mental health and physical safety could not be mitigated by low-level interventions alone.

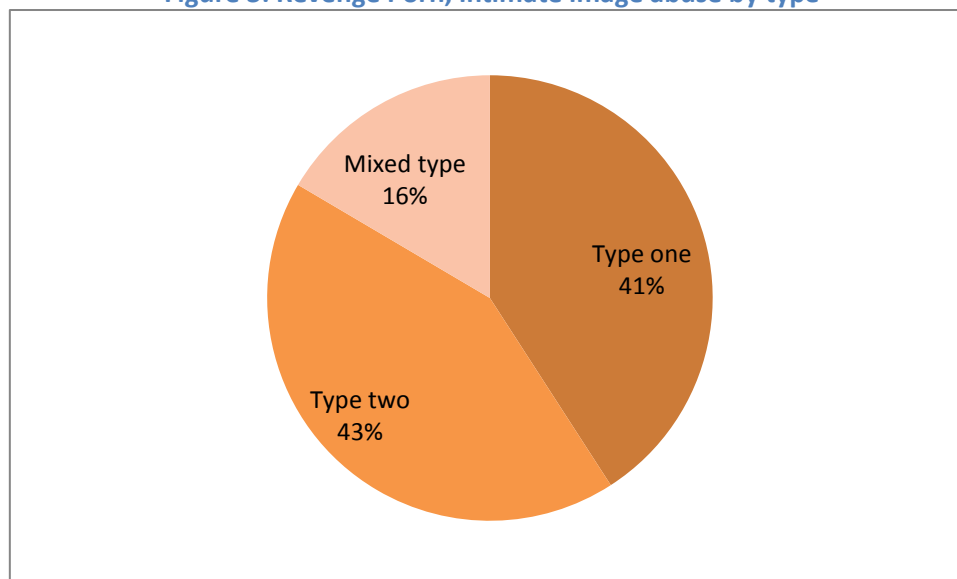**Figure 3: Revenge Porn, intimate image abuse by type**

Figure 4: Revenge Porn, comparison of intimate image abuse types one and two

	Type one	Type two
Nature	• Images shared on public, anonymous porn sites • Victim discovers inadvertently	• Threats to share images on social media/with social network • Victim directly threatened
Perpetrator	• Unclear, presumed to be male ex-partner • Relationship ended months/years ago • Relationship not described as abusive	• Male ex-partner • Very recent relationship breakdown • Ongoing abuse and control in the relationship
Did not report to police	62%	79%
Barriers to reporting	• Fear of judgment	• Fear of judgment • Fear of perpetrator • Not wanting to get perpetrator in trouble
Positive police experience	31% • Victim taken seriously • Incident investigated further	33% • Victim taken seriously • Incident investigated further
Negative police experience	69% • Little awareness of the law • Victim's experience dismissed	67% • Ignoring wider context of abuse • Siding with the perpetrator
Impacts	• Sexual violation • Loss of control • Vulnerability and exposure • Professional impacts • Further abuse	• Sexual violation • Exacerbated existing mental health conditions • Fear of perpetrator • Social isolation
Interpretations	• Shame and self-blame	• Shame and self-blame
Outcomes	• Ongoing effort to get images removed	• Ongoing threat to victim's mental health and physical safety

Sextortion (male)

Nature of abuse

Victims of sextortion were approached by perpetrators via social media. Perpetrators initiated talk which quickly escalated into requests for intimate images and videos. The victim believed he was engaging in mutual sexual activity as pre-recorded videos and stock images were shared in return. The victim was then told that his activity had been recorded and the perpetrator threatened to share it with the victim's social network (partner, family, friends or work colleagues) unless he paid a sum of money. In the sample this sum ranged from £50 to £7,000.

Perpetrator

Whilst the perpetrator claimed to be a young female, sextortion was carried out by criminal networks in overseas locations including Nigeria, Senegal and The Philippines.

Police experiences

The majority (81%) of sextortion victims did not report to the police, the main reason being that they did not want their partners to find out that they had been engaging in sexual activity with another person. Of those that did report to the police, 55% received a positive response and 45% a negative or unfavourable response (*Figure 6*). Positive responses included being taken seriously, being treated sympathetically and having the crime investigated. Negative responses included refusals to help, indifference and being provided with misinformation. Significantly, a large majority of those who received negative police responses disputed or resisted them by doing their own research into the law, escalating their complaints or expressing indignation to the helpline. For example, one victim wrote:

> *'I do feel that I would be treated differently if I was a woman, I am going to escalate to Professional Standards once I have done a bit more research'.*

Impacts

Some victims responded to demands for payment, with one becoming caught in a cycle of demands increasing into the thousands. Much more frequently, however, the impacts of sextortion were social and emotional, rather than economic. Victims expressed anxiety and embarrassment, connected to the fear of exposure and the breakdown in social relationships that might follow (e.g. divorce, termination of employment). One victim wrote:

> *'I can't sleep…I fear I am going to lose my wife and my entire family if this comes out'.*

Interpretations

In stark contrast to victims of intimate image abuse (types one and two), victims of sextortion never blamed themselves for what had happened to them. On the contrary they referred to themselves as 'victims', described having been 'exploited' and referred to the perpetrators as 'criminals. Further to this, they often demanded rapid and 'aggressive'

assistance from the helpline and called practitioners 'useless' when they were unable to help.

Outcomes

The social and emotional impacts of sextortion, despite being severe in the immediate aftermath of the crime, were short lived. Victims were reassured by advice given on the helpline and by the realisation that the perpetrator's threats were empty. Rarely were images shared if payments were not made and the perpetrators quickly ceased contact if they were ignored. Because of this, victims of sextortion appeared to quickly move on from their experiences, closing contact with the helpline with comments such as, *'Yay I am feeling better now'* and *'Learnt my lesson, LOL'.*

Figure 5: Revenge Porn, sextortion aspects

	Sextortion
Nature	• Threats to share images with family and friends • Payment demanded
Perpetrator	• Unknown • Presumed to be criminal gang
Did not report to police	43%
Barriers to reporting	• Fear of partners finding out
Positive police experience	51% • Victim taken seriously • Incident investigated further
Negative police experience	49% • Refusal to help and indifference • Misinformation
Impacts	• Short term anxiety and Embarrassment • Financial impacts
Interpretations	• Describe themselves as victims • No self-blame
Outcome	• Quickly reassured • No long term impacts

Figure 6: Revenge Porn, police experiences by case type

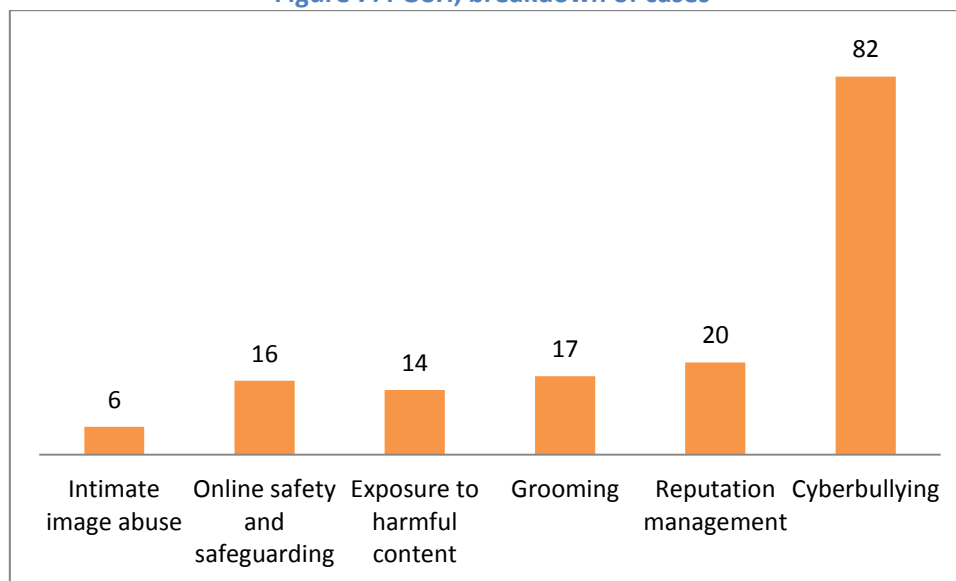Figure 6: Revenge Porn, police experiences by case type
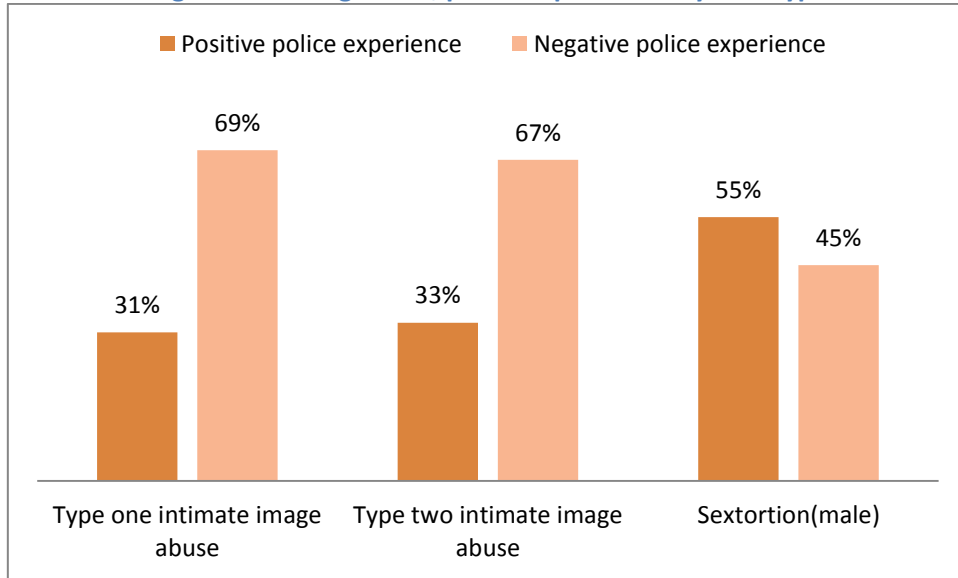
Results 2: The Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH)

Overview

POSH dealt with cases of intimate image abuse (4%), online safety and safeguarding (10%), exposure to harmful content (9%), grooming (11%), reputation management (13%) and cyberbullying (53%) (*Figure 7*).

Figure 7: POSH, breakdown of cases

Intimate image abuse

One of the most surprising findings to emerge from the POSH data was the extremely low proportion of cases which dealt with intimate image abuse (4%). Further to this, and in contrast to the cases of intimate image abuse dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline, none of the POSH intimate image abuse cases occurred within the context of a long-term relationship. Instead, they took place following one-off sexting encounters or group chats gone awry. Some similarities with the Revenge Porn Helpline data could, however, be noted. All POSH victims of intimate image abuse were female and all perpetrators male.

All POSH incidents of intimate image abuse came to light via a direct disclosure from the young person, either to a parent of teacher. It is hard to discern what impacts these incidents had on victims as the professionals did not offer these details. Professionals contacting POSH sometimes expressed an appropriate degree of concern, however, mostly, helpline practitioners had to advise them to take the intimate image abuse more seriously and escalate it.

Online safety and safeguarding and exposure to harmful content

10% of POSH cases dealt with online safety and safeguarding (e.g. disclosing personal information online or accessing unsafe websites) and 9% dealt with exposure to harmful content (e.g. pornography, extremism and sites promoting self-harm). Both of these categories had no specific 'perpetrator', and instead could be put down to a misunderstanding of dangers, curiosity and the vast nature of the Internet. In a significant proportion of these cases, the young person had disclosed the issue directly to a parent or professional. Professionals contacting POSH were often anxious and unsure how to handle these incidents, with a tendency to be over-concerned as opposed to neglectful.

Grooming

11% of the POSH cases dealt with grooming or potential grooming, where the young person in question had been engaging in worrying, sexualised exchanges with an older, often unknown adult via social media. Again, a large majority of these cases came to light due to the young person or their peer group disclosing to a parent or professional. Again, professionals contacting POSH were often anxious and unsure about how to handle these incidents, and helpline practitioners had to reassure and direct them appropriately.

Reputation management

13% of the cases dealt with by POSH concerned reputation management: incidents where the online reputation of either the school or members of staff had been jeopardised. Examples of this included negative reviews and/or problem-raising on social media or websites such as 'rate my teacher'. A minority of these incidents were slanderous or had escalated into harassment and warranted police involvement. However, much more commonly, it was simply a case of people expressing the opinions they were entitled to online.

Regardless of the seriousness of the issue, professionals nearly always expressed a high degree of urgency that this type of content be removed and were frustrated if POSH practitioners could not assist them. Whilst this worry was understandable, it did not arise out of a concern for the safety of pupils (given that they were largely unaffected by this type of content). Instead, it was exclusively about protecting the reputation of the school in question.

Cyberbullying

The remaining 53% of POSH incidents concerned cyberbullying. Cyberbullying incidents were largely one of two types. Type one cyberbullying made up 88% of cyberbullying cases and type two made up 12% (*Figure 8*).

Figure 8: POSH, cyberbullying cases by type

Type two
cyberbullying
12%

Type one
cyberbullying
88%
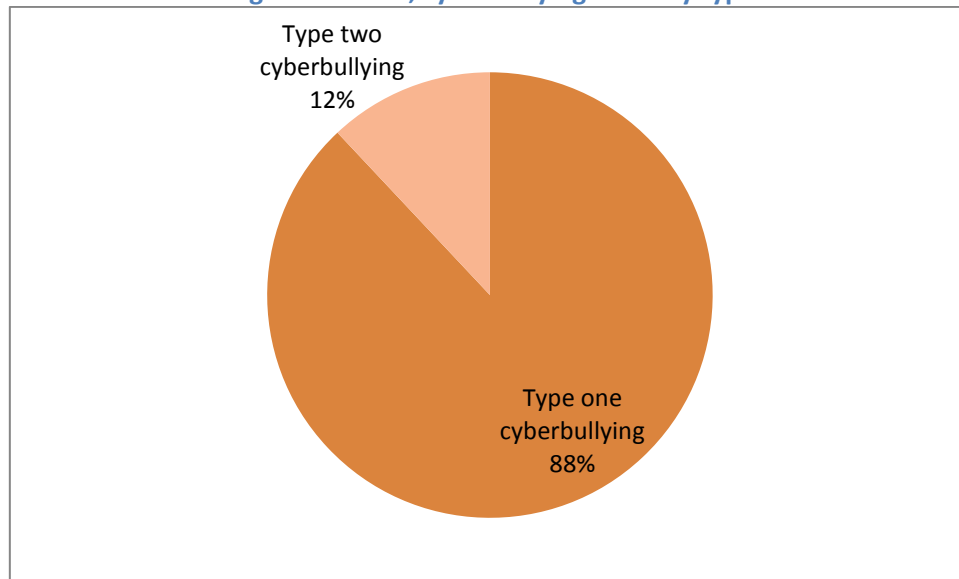
Type one cyberbullying

Nature

Type one cyberbullying involved a fake, anonymous profile on a social media platform which had multiple (sometimes in the 100s) of members and contributors. Often these fake profiles were 'impersonation' accounts of a particular school. Discussions on these accounts revolved around criticising schools or mocking and humiliating groups of staff and/or pupils through comments and memes. This content ranged from relatively benign to more concerning (e.g. disclosure of private details, links to and photo shopping of violent pornography, accusations of paedophilia and inciting violence). These profiles were only ever discovered inadvertently by staff; pupils (either victims or perpetrators) did not disclose this type of cyberbullying. Type one cyberbullying was not inflicted directly and it appeared as if victims were not even supposed to discover it.

Perpetrators

The perpetrators of type one cyberbullying (contributors to the profiles) were mostly anonymous, although they were assumed to be students of the school in question.

Victims

56% of type one cyberbullying profiles targeted staff members and schools, and 44% targeted students (although there was some overlap). Profiles that targeted students were most commonly aimed at a large mixed-sex group (46%), however, when a single-sex group was targeted, victims were much more likely to be female (41%) than male (13%).

Impacts

Professionals contacting POSH often reported that type one cyberbullying negatively impacted their staff members' mental health. Professionals did not describe the impact that this type of cyberbullying had on students.

Professionals' responses

Professionals described type one cyberbullying as having a detrimental effect on staff and school reputation. As such, they expressed a high degree of urgency in getting profiles removed, particularly when they involved staff and schools. Similar levels of concern were not expressed for the pupils who were victims of these accounts. Type one cyberbullying incidents were rarely reported to the police. Professionals contacted POSH to seek help with the removal of profiles. Often helpline practitioners were able to assist with this, by escalating to the social media platforms in question. At times, however, they are unable or unwilling to intervene (for example if profiles did not breach community guidelines or if they contained information that should be further investigated, such as accusations of paedophilia). Alongside this, profiles which had previously been successfully removed frequently resurfaced. A number of professionals become frustrated when practitioners were unable to help them, or when profiles were repeatedly uploaded.

Type two cyberbullying
Nature

Type two cyberbullying was perpetrated through social media channels or text messages, in a direct (perpetrator to victim) non-anonymous way. Victims were subject to abuse based on topics such as their appearance or popularity and were threatened and harassed, often with physical violence. At times abuse was racist and homophobic. Frequently, abuse was longstanding and also existed offline, with the digitally facilitated aspect of it being merely the tip of the iceberg. The professionals contacting POSH about type two cyberbullying had often been made aware of it (and the offline bullying that accompanied it) because of direct disclosures from victims or their parents.

Perpetrator/s

Type two cyberbullying involved direct peer-to-peer bullying, usually by a singular or small group (2-3) of perpetrators. The victim was always aware of who the perpetrator or perpetrators were.

Victim/s

Type two cyberbullying had one specific victim. Commonly perpetrators and victims had previously been friends or been in close peer groups. When gender was disclosed, victims were much more likely to be female (64%) than male (36%).

Impacts

The impacts of type two cyberbullying were often severe, with mental health difficulties, absence from school and negative effects on studying being reported.

Professionals' responses

Encouragingly, professionals and parents appeared to take type two cyberbullying seriously, with escalation to in-house anti-bullying leads and the police being common.

Figure 9: POSH, comparison of cyberbullying types one and two

	Type one	Type two
Nature	• Memes and comments shared on public, 'impersonation' accounts • Accounts discovered inadvertently	• Abuse through social media or text messages • Part of ongoing on and offline abuse • Victims disclose to school and parents
Perpetrator(s)	• Multiple perpetrators • Anonymous, presumed to be current or former school pupils	• Singular or small group (2-3) • Known to the victim
Victim(s)	• School and staff members or groups of students • Students more likely to be female than male	• School students • One specific victim • More likely to be female than male
Impacts	• Staff mental health • School's professional reputation • Impacts on students unknown	• Severe mental health impacts • Absence from school and effects on studying
Professionals' responses	• Concerned to protect the staff and schools reputation • Urgency in getting content removed • Annoyance at lack of removal • Little concern for student victims/perpetrators • Did not escalate further	• Treat incidents seriously • Often escalate further

Discussion and Implications

Having presented findings from both the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH, the ways in which these findings respond to the questions set out at the beginning of this report, as well as their broader significance, is now discussed.

Intimate image abuse in adults

Who are the adult victims of intimate image abuse and how does it impact them?

Whilst both men and women contacted the Revenge Porn Helpline, callers were disproportionately female. Females were also much more likely to be victims of intimate image abuse, perpetrated by a male ex-partner, as opposed to sextortion by a criminal gang. These findings conform to results found in previous studies into intimate image abuse, which highlight gendered patterns of perpetration and victimization, in samples other than helpline callers (Citron & Franks, 2014; Franks, 2011; Powell, 2010; Uhl et al, 2018).

Alongside these gendered patterns of victimization and perpetration, the outcomes and impacts of having intimate images disclosed (or receiving threats to disclose) differed according to gender. On the whole, male sextortion victims carried little shame and self-blame, received a higher proportion of positive police responses and were able to quickly move on from their experiences. On the contrary, female victims (of both types of intimate image abuse) experienced a great deal of shame and self-blame, received a higher proportion of negative police responses, suffered lasting social and emotional impacts and commonly described their experiences as sexually violating. Again, these findings support previous studies into gender and intimate image abuse, particularly those which outline the inherently sexually violating nature of intimate image abuse for women (Bates, 2017; McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017; Rifkind, 2014).

This gendered disparity in, firstly, the victimization and perpetration of intimate image abuse closely aligns with the gendered disparity seen in other sexual offences such as rape and sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, all forms of sexual harassment and domestic violence and coercive control (of which sexual abuse is often an intrinsic part) (Cahill, 2001; Crown Prosecution Service, 2018; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kelly, 1988; Sharratt, 2019; Stark, 2007; Vera-Gray, 2017a). When discussing these other types of offences, experts have been keen to emphasize how they are about power and control and are manifestations of male power in a male-dominated society (Cahill, 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Stark, 2007). In other words, the fact that it is mostly heterosexual men who perpetrate these crimes against female victims is because cultural and social orders and relationship dynamics normalize and legitimize male dominance over women. Because of the common root of all of these crimes, experts have argued that, rather than being seen as separate or distinct, they must be understood as varying points on a 'continuum' of male sexual violence against women (Kelly, 1988).

This idea of a continuum of sexual violence has been used to emphasize, not only the common root of all of these crimes, but also the consistency of their impacts for female victims (Kelly, 1988; Sharratt, 2019). Crimes across this continuum have all been noted to limit lives, statuses and opportunities, erode self-worth, safety and trust, and violate bodily autonomy and integrity. Whilst these impacts might vary in length or severity, the key point is that they are *characteristically consistent*, regardless of the apparent 'seriousness' of the crime in question; in other words it doesn't matter whether the crime is of rape or something more 'commonplace' such as sexual harassment, victims will almost always experience a degree of violation.

These observations have, in recent years, trickled down to public opinion and policy. Now the gendered nature and interconnected impacts of crimes across the continuum of sexual violence is beginning to be acknowledged and reflected in law (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018; Montoya, 2009, 2013; Kantola, 2010; Watts & Zimmermann 2002). As discussed in the introduction, however, these recognitions have yet to be extended towards intimate image abuse, a fact which is critiqued by feminist legal scholars and advocates (McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017). The findings of this report, which reveal the intrinsically gendered nature of intimate image abuse, alongside its gendered and sexually violating impacts, support these critiques and affirm that image abuse should be reclassified as a sexual offence and officially recognized as a part of men's violence against women.

Who are the adult perpetrators of intimate image abuse and what are their intentions?

Intimate image abuse is overwhelming perpetrated by male ex-partners or presumed male ex-partners. Despite this consistency in perpetrator identity, male ex-partners commit intimate image abuse under two quite different set of circumstances. These two types of intimate image abuse enable us to infer two distinct sets of perpetrator intentions, each with significant implications for the current law surrounding intimate image abuse, which currently requires 'with the intention to cause distress' as a condition for prosecution (Criminal Justice and Courts Act, 2015).

Type 1 perpetrator intentions

Perpetrators of type one intimate image abuse share images on public pornography sites. At times, the victim's personal details are also disclosed, seeming to indicate that the perpetrator intends her to suffer distress. Significantly, however, personal details *are not always* simultaneously disclosed, meaning that type one perpetrator intentions are often unrelated, or only tangentially related, to victim distress.

Whether distress was intended or not, it was an inevitable outcome of type one intimate image abuse. As discussed, *all* victims of intimate image abuse experienced significant mental health impacts. On top of this, victims of type one intimate image abuse experienced effects which were specifically related to the public and anonymous nature of this crime,

such as paranoia and hyper-vigilance. These effects were further compounded by the negative police responses victims experienced. Police dismissed the 'reality' or 'seriousness' of type one intimate image abuse, effectively discounting the distress it caused.

As discussed previously, 'with the intention to cause distress' has been labelled a misguided prosecution requirement by both researchers and advocates (Hall & Hearn, 2019; Hill, 2012; Lee, 2012; Pina et al, 2017). Given that, for perpetrators of type one intimate image abuse, the intention to cause distress is not always apparent, and, as such, is largely irrelevant, the findings of this study support these critiques. Legislation surrounding type one intimate image abuse would do better to focus on the intrinsic distress experienced by victims of this crime. Hopefully, incorporating these observations into law would go some way to improving police responses to victims by encouraging them to validate victim experience and proceed in a way which is victim-lead.

Type 2 perpetrator intentions

Perpetrators of type two intimate image abuse display a long history of abusive behaviour towards their victims. Their threats to share images form but one part of this broader pattern and are used as way in which to control the victim, most commonly to prevent her from leaving the relationship.

This behaviour firmly conforms to what we know about particular types of domestic violence (Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2007). Whilst, in the past, domestic violence was largely thought of only in terms of physical violence, within recent years these understandings have shifted. Increasingly, there is recognition that domestic violence contains ongoing patterns of psychological and emotional abuse, designed to gain power, deter or trigger specific behaviours, demonstrate dominance or incite fear (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Stark, 2007). In 2015 the offence of 'controlling or coercive behaviour' was introduced under the Serious Crime Act in recognition of this (Serious Crime Act, 2015).

Thanks to this legislation, progressively more behaviours are now being recognized as coercive and controlling, including isolation and monitoring tactics, financial control and 'gaslighting' (Rights of Women, 2016; Stark, 2007). Unfortunately, these recognitions are yet to fully extend to intimate image abuse and, it is only very recently that this behaviour is being researched and analysed as part of coercive control (Drouin, Ross & Tobin, 2015; Thacker, 2017) This lack of recognition regarding the nature of type two intimate image abuse was evident in the negative responses that victims in this sample received from police. Victims of type two intimate image abuse were blamed by police for their relationships with their perpetrators and, as such, the broader context of their abuse commonly went unacknowledged.

Again, these findings have implications for the current law. Whilst perpetrators of type two intimate image abuse appear to be, at least partially, motivated by 'the intention to cause

distress', there is danger that, by focusing on this aspect, attention will only be paid to the singular act of intimate image abuse. Legislation surrounding type two intimate image abuse would do better to focus on the ongoing patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour which surrounds it (of which the intimate image abuse is *but one part*) and work towards prosecuting this broader offence. Again, incorporating these observations into law would, hopefully, improve police responses to victims.

Intimate image abuse in under 18s

Are there any similarities or differences in cases dealt with by the Revenge Porn Helpline versus the Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH)?

Whilst the Revenge Porn Helpline took a high volume of calls from victims of intimate image abuse, POSH dealt with very few, only 4% of their cases. Whilst this is a puzzling finding, a number of possible explanations exist as to why this might be the case. These explanations, alongside their plausibility and implications are now discussed.

1. Under 18s are simply not falling victim to intimate image abuse.

Whilst this would be encouraging, it is highly unlikely given that previous research has highlighted how under 18s are most vulnerable to this type of abuse (Barter et al, 2009; Lenhart, Ybarra, & Price-Feeny, 2016; Ringrose et al, 2012; Sherlock, 2016).

2. Under 18s are falling victim to intimate image abuse but are not disclosing it to the professionals that care for them.

This explanation is more plausible than the previous. Studies which draw attention to the high rates of intimate image abuse in young people have simultaneously outlined how under 18s either minimize their experiences or fail to acknowledge them as abusive (Barter et al, 2012; Ringrose et al, 2012). This is especially the case for females and has been described as related to how young women are socialized to regard sexual objectification and dominance from male partners as normal (Barter et al, 2009; Guardian News, 2011). Further to this, research also indicates that, even when young people are aware of intimate image abuse, they rarely disclose to parents and teachers, due to lack of trust, or a fear of not being taken seriously (Barter, 2006; Barter et al 2009; Brown, Puster, Vasquez, Hunter & Lescano, 2007; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf & O'Leary, 2001; Ocampo, Shelly & Jaycox, 2007). Again, young women in particular have been noted not to disclose intimate image abuse, so as to maintain the status afforded by a romantic relationship (Barter et al, 2009).

Whilst a lack of awareness of intimate image abuse or a fear of disclosing it to professionals are likely explanations for the absence of intimate image abuse on POSH, they are also concerning. They do, however, offer opportunities for positive interventions to be made. Interventions might focus on educating young people on the nature and harms of intimate image abuse so as to enable them to recognize it in their own lives. Interventions might also

focus on building trusting and positive relationships with professionals so as to enable disclosures of intimate image abuse to take place.

3. Professionals are receiving disclosures of intimate image abuse from under 18s. Rather than seeing the need to contact POSH for advice, professionals feel confident dealing with these disclosures alone and make use of other appropriate channels, including in-house safeguarding leads, social services and the police.

This explanation would be encouraging; however, some of the other POSH data suggests that it might be implausible. As discussed in the findings, professionals frequently contacted POSH regarding incidents of online safety, safeguarding and potential grooming. In these instances, professionals were panicked, unsure of the best course of action to take and sought advice from helpline practitioners. It seems unlikely that this level of uncertainty would exist surrounding online safety, safeguarding and grooming incidents and *not* incidents of intimate image abuse. Further to this, and as was also revealed in the findings, the few incidents of intimate image abuse that *were* disclosed to professionals were not treated with appropriate concern, a fact which does little to suggest that others would be.

4. Professionals are receiving disclosures of intimate image abuse from young people. These disclosures are ignored or not taken as seriously as they should be.

This explanation seems more plausible for a number of reasons. Up until very recently, support and advice for professionals managing young people's digital interactions was heavily weighted towards dealing with problematic adult-child interactions (e.g. grooming and online 'stranger danger') with comparatively little attention paid to abuse between peers (DCSF, 2009; NSPCC, 2013; see Barter, et al 2009; Salter et al, 2013 for discussion of this). Furthermore, when specific advice on peer-to-peer interactions did begin to emerge, it was often vague and confusing. For example, a lot of the earlier conversations on peer-to-peer 'sexting' focused on how 'sharing an indecent image of a minor' was a blanket criminal offence (Home Office, 2018; Madigan and Temple, 2018; Sexual Offences Act, 2003; Sky News, 2018). These conversations might have led professionals to be cautious of drawing attention to any type of 'sexting', for fear of unnecessarily criminalizing young people. In these early years, there was also little discussion on the importance of making distinctions between consensual sexting and intimate image abuse (for discussion see Collenbrander, 2016). This might have resulted in professionals inaccurately conflating the two and ignoring the seriousness of intimate image abuse (Collenbrander, 2016; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011).

Whilst these explanations are worrying, they also represent important points of intervention. More recent conversations on peer-to-peer sexting have drawn clear distinctions between 'experimental' sexting and what experts have termed 'aggravated' sexting (a broad term which includes non-consensual intimate image abuse) (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011). Information now exists regarding the seriousness of 'aggravated' sexting, and advice is available on how to distinguish it from 'experimental' sexting and respond

appropriately (Collenbrander, 2016; NICE, 2016; UKCCIS, 2017). Interventions might focus on bringing professionals up to date with this guidance.

What can we learn from these similarities or differences?

Whilst POSH had a notable absence of intimate image abuses cases, similarities and patterns between the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH data could, nevertheless, be identified. POSH dealt with a high proportion of cyberbullying cases which could be categorized into two types: 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 direct bullying as part of a broader pattern of abuse, by a known perpetrator who had an existing relationship with the victim. These two types of cyberbullying share extremely similar characteristics with types one and two intimate image abuse, respectively. Furthermore, all four types of online abuse disproportionately affected females.

Whilst these observations should not be taken as indicating that cyberbullying and intimate image abuse are identical harms, they are nevertheless concerning and warrant further enquiry. As discussed in the introduction to this report, little research explores the connections between perpetrating intimate image abuse in childhood and in adulthood (see Salter et al, 2013 for a notable exception). There is, however, a significant body of work which examines links between intimate image abuse and cyberbullying, particular the large-scale anonymous types (in this report referred to as 'type one'). This research draws attention to how problematic social dynamics, made worse by digital technologies (including group-mentality, reduced empathy, anonymity and a lack of traceability or accountability) can be seen to enable both behaviours (Coopera et al, 2016; Goodboy & Martin, 2015; Jonsson et al, 2014; Moor & Anderson, 2019; Pina, 2017; Van Ouytsel et al, 2019).

These insights offer important points of intervention for professionals dealing with cyberbullying, particularly type one cyberbullying. Whilst, encouragingly, professionals took cases of type two cyberbullying seriously, not so encouragingly, they failed to respond appropriately to type one cyberbullying: when dealing with type one cyberbullying, professionals were almost exclusively concerned with school reputation and staff mental health. Given that type one cyberbullying so closely parallels with type one intimate image abuse and that, furthermore, research emphasises the connections between the two, schools would do well to shift the focus of their attentions towards victim care and perpetrator accountability.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this report was to explore the connections between patterns of victimisation and perpetration of intimate image abuse in adults, and these vulnerabilities and behaviours in under 18s. The findings of this report have shown two types of intimate image abuse in adults, which, whilst distinct in nature, share a gendered disparity. Findings also revealed the ways in which intimate image abuse connects up to other types of online abuse, particularly cyberbullying. Both of these findings indicate a clear need to situate intimate image abuse within a broader context of problematic behaviours and structural inequalities, both on and offline.

One limitation of this study was that, whilst it was able to draw attention to the gendered context of intimate image abuse and associated abuses, there was limited scope to explore how other structural oppressions, including race, sexuality, gender identity and disability, might further intersect with this abuse. This limitation was largely due to restrictions in the type of data available on the Revenge Porn Helpline and POSH databases, as practitioners are not always able to collect monitoring information of this type. The significance of applying an intersectional analysis to abuses on the continuum of male sexual violence has been acknowledged by scholars (Nixon & Humphreys, 2010; Vera-Gray, 2017b, Walby, Armstrong & Strid, 2012) and future work on intimate image abuse and associated abuses might aim to do in-depth interviewing with victims, so as to foreground intersectionality.

A further limitation of this study was that it was unable to directly analyse under 18s experiences of intimate image abuse, due to a near absence of disclosure to professionals. Whilst this absence was significant in and of itself, future work might focus on directly interviewing young people, in order to discern whether their experiences of intimate image abuse connect to their cyberbullying experiences, thus testing the speculations outlined in this report.

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