

# *Intimate image abuse, an evolving landscape*

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Revenge Porn  
**Helpline**



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# Helpline timeline

**2015**

Disclosing of intimate images made against the law

**2015**

Working with Queen Mary University London on their SPITE project



Opening of the Helpline

**2015**

First prosecution under section 33 – 16 May 2015

**2015**



**1,000 cases**

**2017**

1,000 cases reported to the Helpline

Crowdfunder to keep Helpline open

**2017**



**2018**

Facebook Pilot project to hash NCII



Dedicated support for sex workers

**2018**

**2020**

Our busiest year yet—over 3,000 cases

*100,000+ images removed*

**2020**

Surpassing 100,000 images removed



**2019**

Upskirting made against the law (April)

“Intimate images” Law Commission review

**2019**

Expansion of university resources

**2020**

**2019**

University resources



**2019**

40,000 images removed, 5,000 total cases, 20,000 contacts

*40,000 images removed*



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## *Executive Summary*

The Revenge Porn Helpline (RPH) is operated by South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) and supports victims of intimate image abuse. RPH has provided support for over five years, with caseloads increasing year-by-year. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, caseload increased two-fold. From 2015-20 the RPH supported over 8,000 people and successfully removed nearly 200,000 pieces of content shared illegally.

This report shows that reported instances of intimate image abuse have increased significantly over the last five years. This type of abuse continues to be a gendered issue, with women more likely to come forward as victims.

We aim to widen the scope of support for those experiencing intimate image abuse with technological innovations, further advice for sex workers and contributions to the law review being at the forefront of RPH's work in the future.

- 1** Reports to the RPH doubled in 2020 and continue to rise.
- 2** Cases of sextortion (webcam blackmail) tripled in 2020.
- 3** Intimate image abuse is predominantly male-perpetrated, accounting for over 76% of cases where the perpetrators' gender is known.
- 4** When a female reports images to the Helpline, an average of 42 images are reported, whereas it is less than two for male victims.
- 5** RPH has removed almost 200,000 intimate images since 2015.
- 6** RPH is working with the Law Commission on their review of the law on sharing intimate images without consent to improve support for victims.
- 7** RPH continues to work to improve client support out of hours and provide more support to vulnerable groups such as students, sex workers and those with disabilities.



# *What is the Revenge Porn Helpline?*

**Our mission is to empower all victims of intimate image abuse with support, practical help, and advice.**

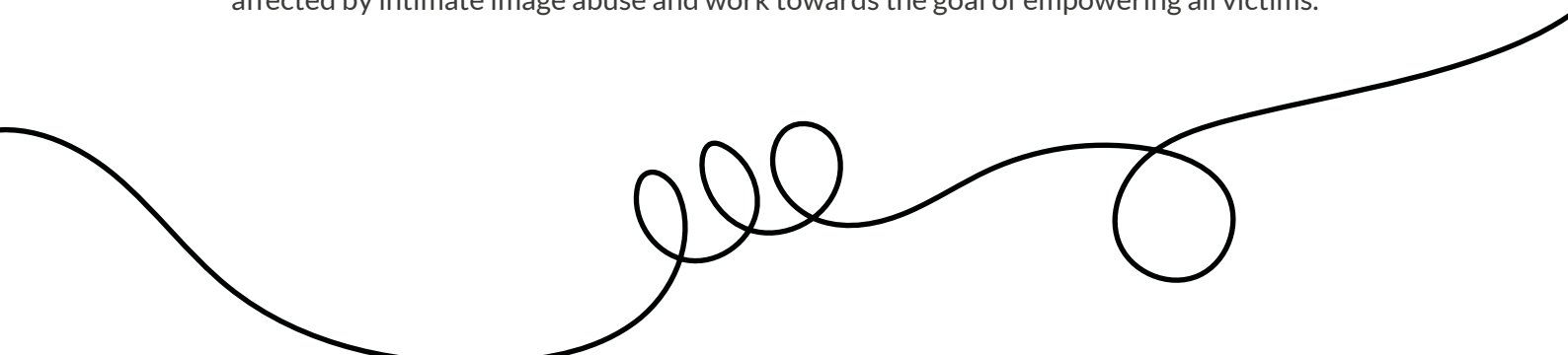
The Revenge Porn Helpline (RPH) is operated by South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL), a partner in the UK Safer Internet Centre. It was founded in 2015, due to the volume of calls to its Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) that made it clear that there was a significant issue and demand for this support.

RPH has evolved alongside the law and practice as the needs of our clients have changed. We have continued to develop the support we can offer by building partnerships and improving practice.

Primarily, RPH provides advice and information regarding the law around intimate image abuse, how to report to the police, how to collect evidence and the reporting of private sexual images online for removal. RPH also signposts to a variety of support services where appropriate.

RPH was initially funded by the Government Equalities Office, but in 2019 funding was transferred to the Home Office following an acknowledgement that the issues seen by RPH sat more appropriately within the government's Violence Against Women and Girls strategy.

RPH has always been a small Helpline and the service mainly works within a limited budget from government funding. RPH therefore relies on additional funding and donations from the public and private sectors. RPH promises always to help any clients affected by intimate image abuse and work towards the goal of empowering all victims.



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## What is intimate image abuse?

Intimate image abuse is the act of sharing private sexual content without consent with the intent to cause distress or threatening to do so. This type of abuse also includes recording sexual content without knowledge or consent. Despite the name of the Helpline, we prefer to avoid the term “revenge porn”: the sharing of intimate images without consent is not for “revenge”, nor is it “porn” – it is **abuse**. The term “revenge porn” does not cover all the different aspects of intimate image abuse which include: (s)extortion (or webcam blackmail), threatening to share intimate content, voyeurism, cyber flashing and/or upskirting. Therefore, we prefer to use the all-encompassing and victim supportive term of intimate image abuse (IIA).



### These are the forms of IIA that RPH can support victims with:

**The sharing of intimate images without consent** (and with the intent to cause distress) is most commonly referred to as “revenge porn”.

In April 2015, the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, section 33 made it an offence for a person to “disclose a private sexual photograph or film if the disclosure is made without the consent of an individual who appears in the photograph or film and with the intention of causing that individual distress”. This law covers the offence in England and Wales. In Scotland, the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016 made it an offence to disclose a private sexual photograph without consent with the intent to cause distress, or if reckless as to whether distress will be caused. In Northern Ireland, the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2016 made it an offence to disclose a private sexual photograph without consent with the intent to cause distress.

By “private”, the law means that the content cannot be already made public or created for commercial use. This person’s content could be shared anywhere on or offline including, but not limited to, general pornography sites, social media platforms, chat forums, private messages or printed copies.

Sexual in its legal definition is any image depicting genitals, or breasts, or any sexual acts that wouldn’t normally be seen in public.



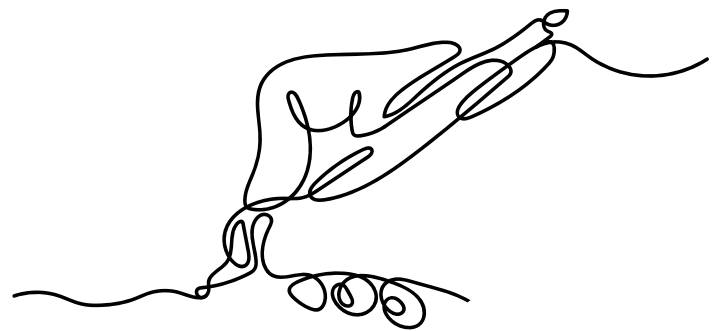
**Threatening to share intimate content** was not originally a specific offence, although the Sentencing Council included the “threat to disclose intimate material or sexually explicit images” within its guidelines for offences under the Communications Act 2003 which came into effect from 1st October 2018. The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) includes threats to share private sexual images as an offence in England and Wales.

Threats to share content can be online or offline and though the perpetrator may or may not have had the content they describe; the Helpline was able to offer advice when other behaviours are considered. For instance, one could be subject to malicious communications, or even a pattern of harassment or stalking; all of which would be against the law.

**Upskirting** is a more recent crime (2019) which has made illegal the taking of images beneath someone’s clothing, to show genitals or underwear in public without consent.

**Webcam blackmail (sextortion)** is a crime where the victim has begun an online relationship with someone who may be using a fake identity. Once the relationship has become sexual, and images or videos are shared (or recorded during a video chat), then this is used as leverage for financial gain. These operations are often carried out by organised crime groups based overseas. Though in most cases content isn’t shared, the pressure of the moment and fear of sharing can affect victims substantially.

**Voyeurism** is a sexual offence wherein the victim has been filmed by someone without their knowledge or consent, while nude, or undertaking a sexual act, for sexual gratification. This is limited to private spaces, or where the body parts/ acts would not usually be seen in public (i.e., being topless at a beach would not be covered, but in a changing room would).



## *What is the purpose of this report?*

The purpose of this report is two-fold: it aims to outline the trends reported to RPH by its clients and demonstrate the effectiveness of RPH in supporting victims.

- This report will analyse our five years’ experience of working in this sector, postulate what trends may be seen in the future and assess how policy and RPH need to adapt to support future victims effectively.
- This report will also demonstrate RPH’s ongoing success in supporting victims of IIA and in the removal of online content.

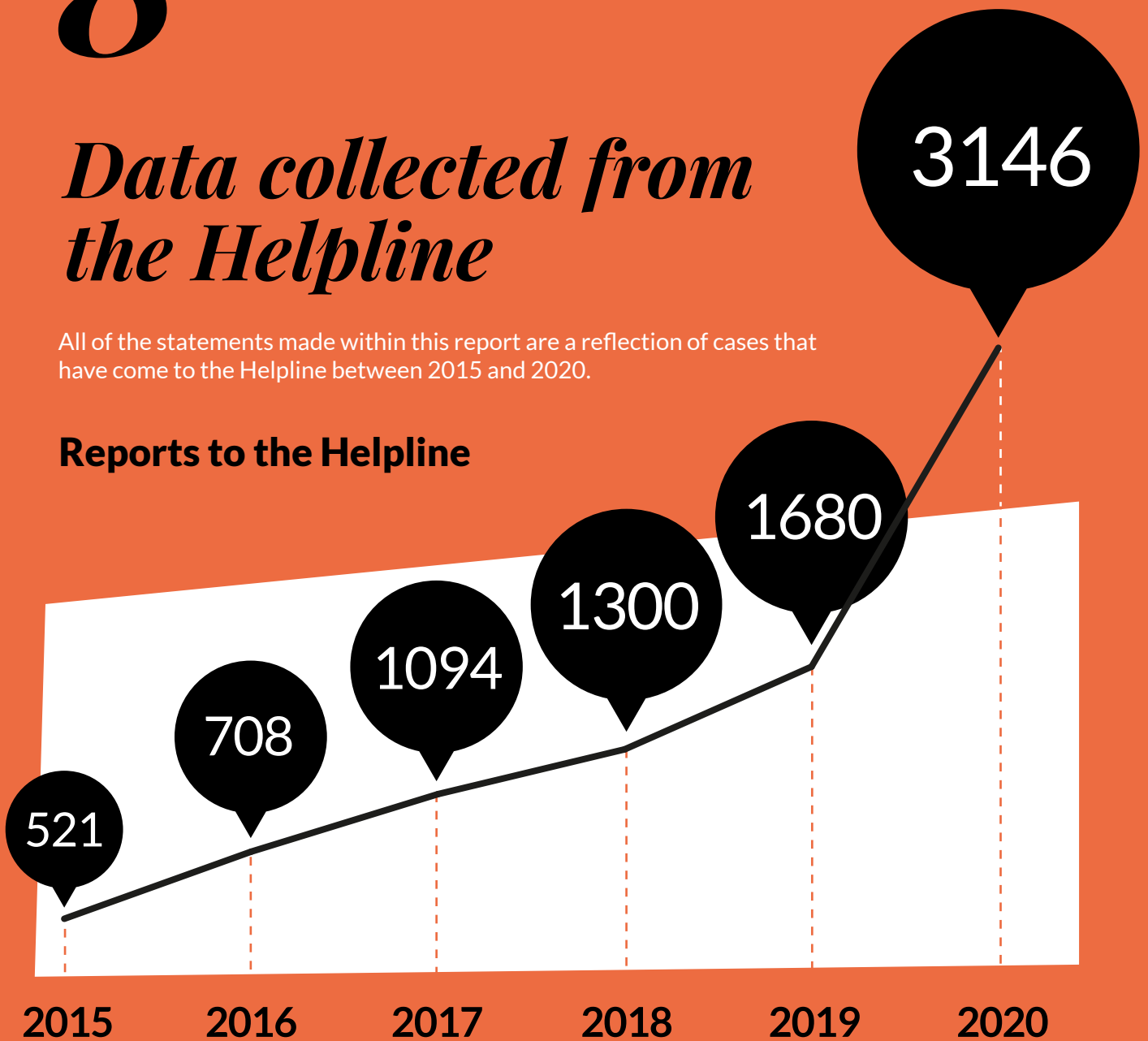
These outcomes are paramount to RPH; supporting people who are isolated by this abuse, allowing violated victims to regain control of their images and rebuild their lives.

# 8

## *Data collected from the Helpline*

All of the statements made within this report are a reflection of cases that have come to the Helpline between 2015 and 2020.

### **Reports to the Helpline**

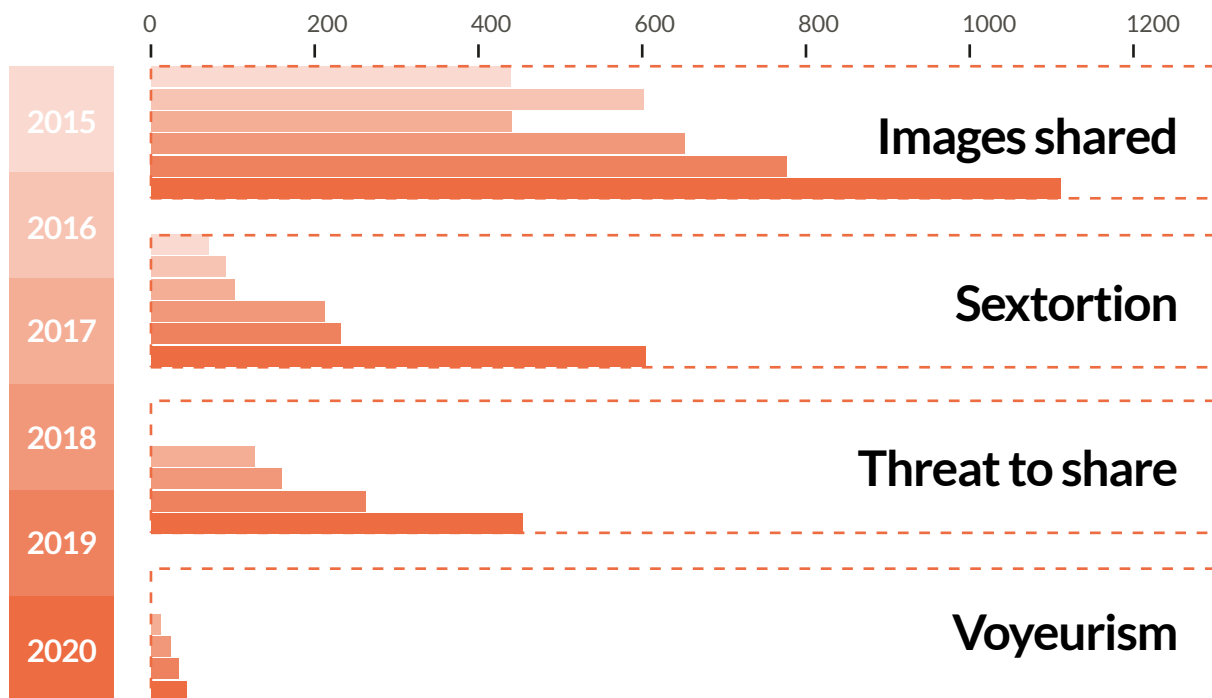


*Reports to the helpline*

Since 2015, reports to the Helpline have increased year on year, escalating sharply since 2018. In 2020 the Helpline reached a record peak of 3,146 cases, and early 2021 shows no sign of this slowing. That is over 3,000 people in one year coming to us for support and advice.

With the rise in cases, there has also been a rise in the number of contacts with our clients. This quickly accelerated after the first COVID-19 lockdown, as we suspended our phone service in 2020 and were unable to take calls remotely. The average contacts per person rose from 3.8 to 4.4 across 2019/2020.

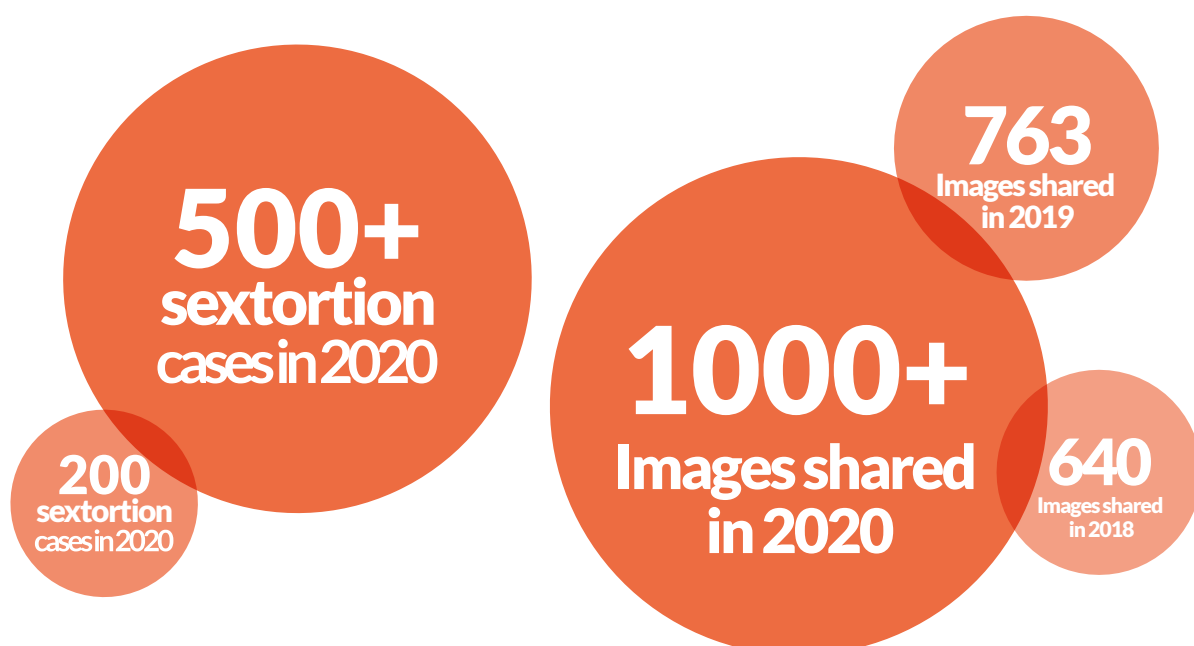
As one would expect with a rise in cases yearly, reports pertaining to intimate image abuse (IIA), voyeurism and sextortion has also risen over the last five years.



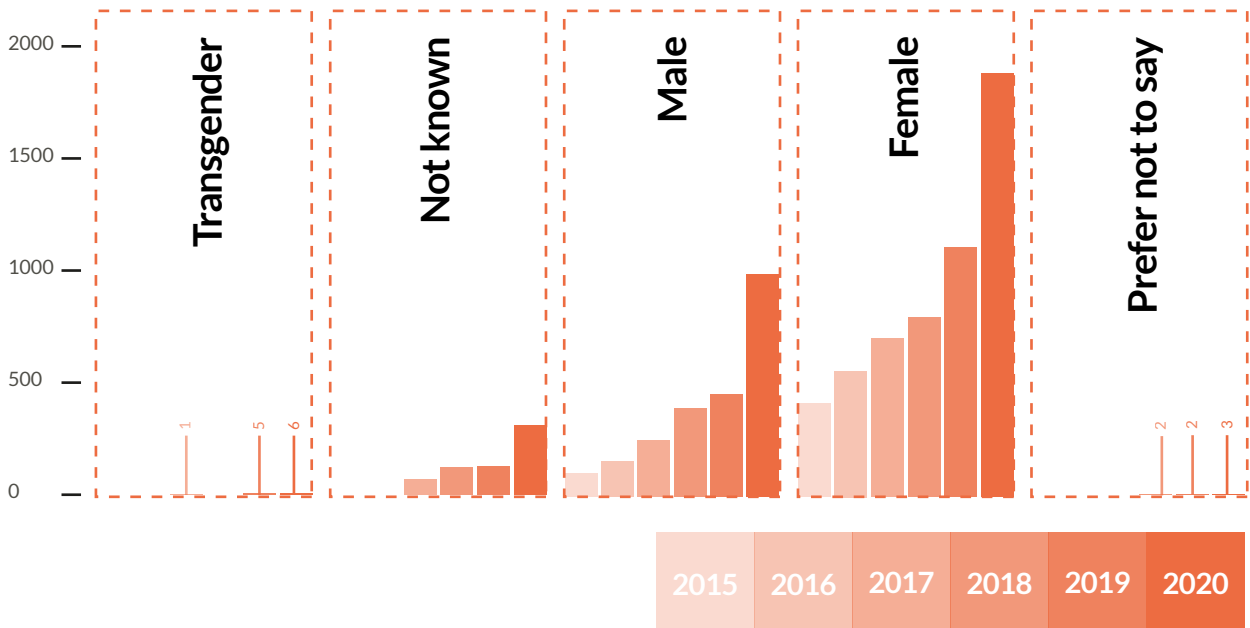
Primary issue reported

## Primary issue reported to the Helpline

As demonstrated in the figure below, in line with our overall increase, the numbers of all these individual behaviours have risen. The most significant here are the reports of sextortion which, between 2019 and 2020, nearly tripled from 200 to nearly 600 cases. Images being shared have risen each year by almost a third (excluding 2017), with 2020 reporting over 1,000 cases. It now makes up one third of the Helpline's overall caseload for the entire year.



# 10



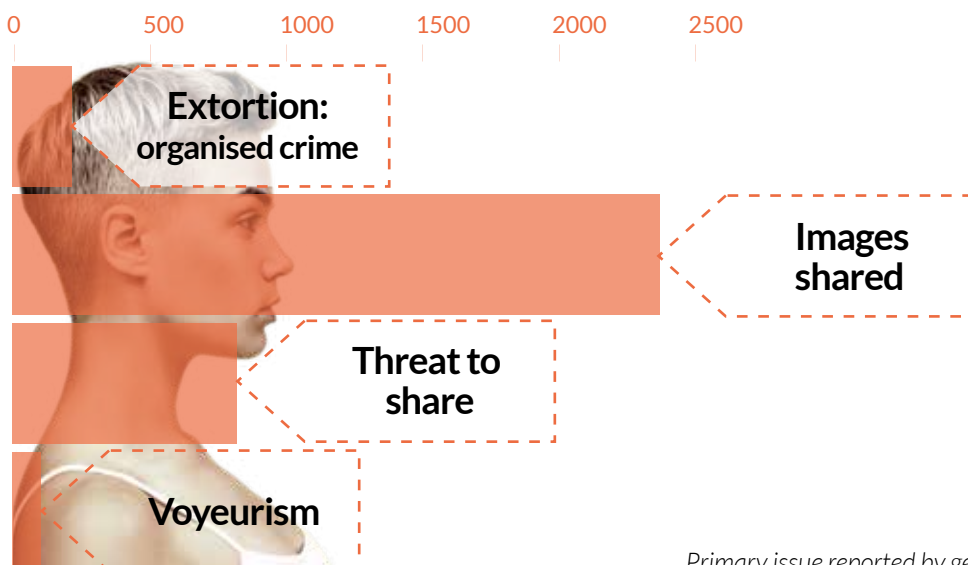
Gender of client

## Gender of reporting client

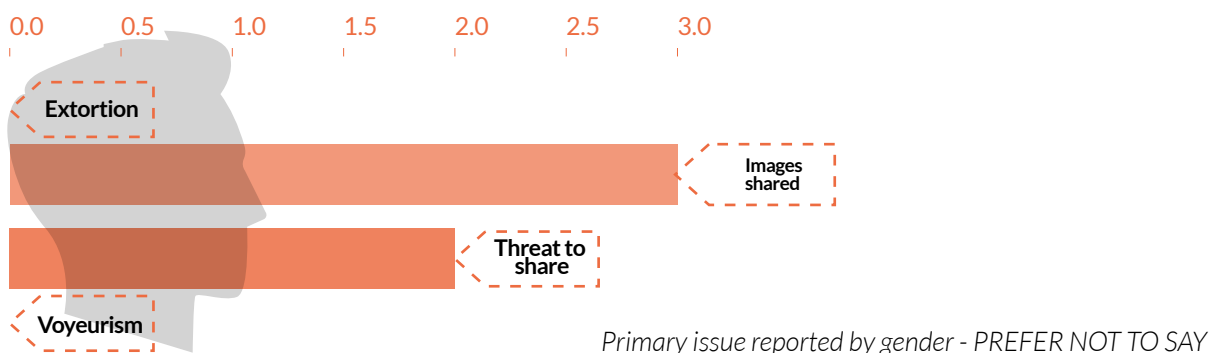
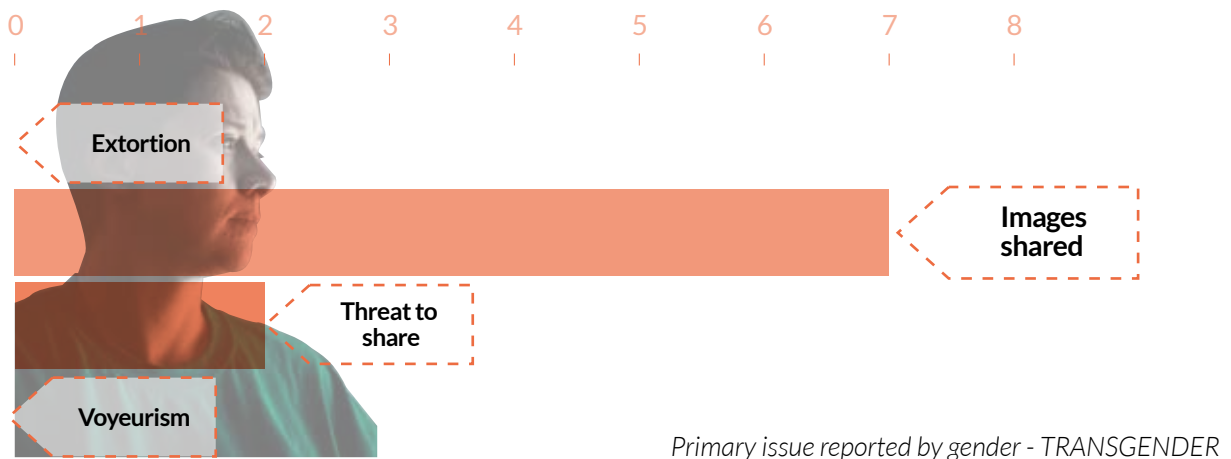
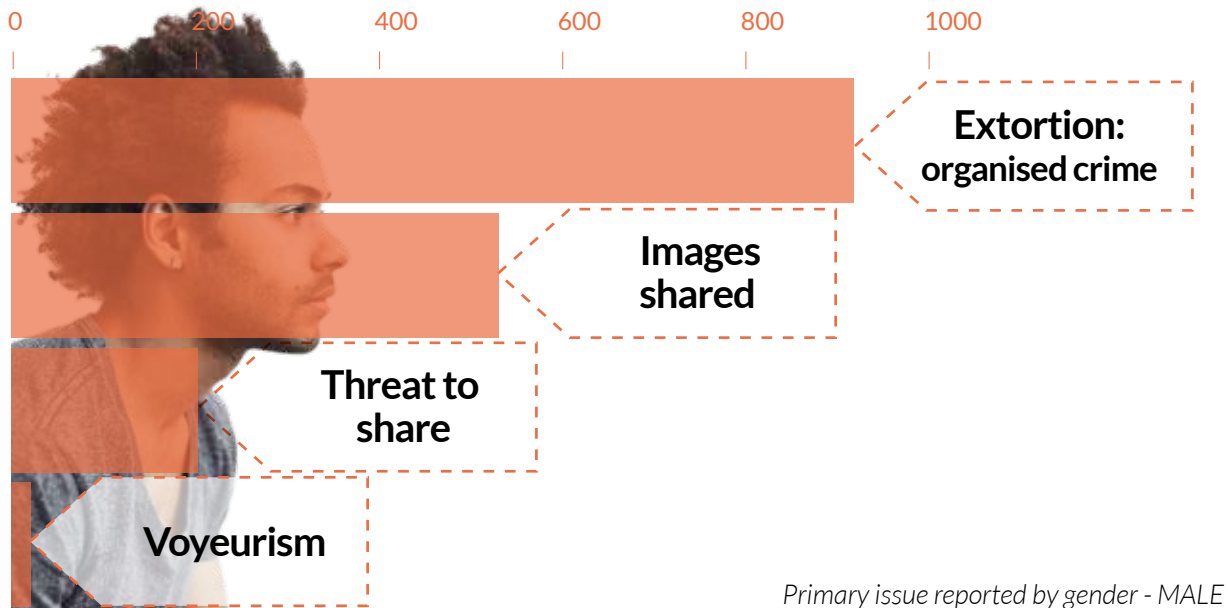
Out of the 3,146 cases in 2020, over 62% are reported to be female victims, a proportion that has remained consistent on the Helpline since 2015. This is illustrated below.

Furthermore, female clients are reported as more likely to be victims of intimate

images being shared or threats to share images. Over the last five years, the cases reported to the Helpline show that women are around five times more likely to be victims of intimate image abuse than other genders. Conversely, men are five times more likely to be a victim of sextortion than women.



Primary issue reported by gender - FEMALE



A clear picture is emerging from the data we have collected. Female victims are the most likely to report their suspected perpetrator being male at over 75% of our total cases from 2015–2020. In both genders, intra-gender victim-to-perpetrator reports make up less than 8% of cases, while male victim/female perpetrator issues are just over 9%. We have limited data on LGBTQ+ cases and so we may not be representing the full scale of the issue here.

# 12

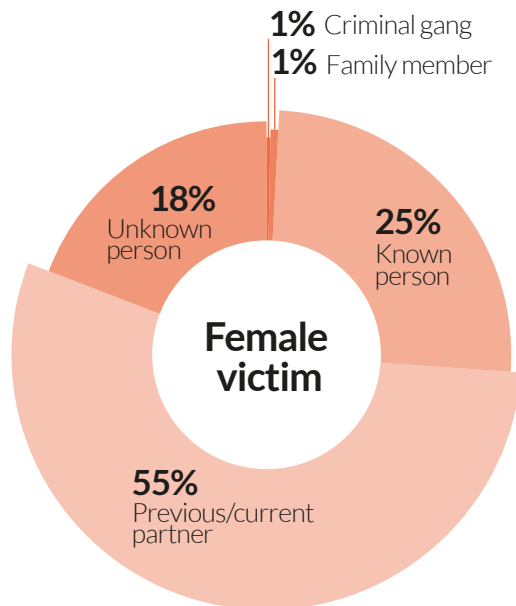
Digging further, there are large differences between suspected perpetrators and the victims' sex (note: non-binary, non-cis genders have not been shown here due to the lack of data held).

TABLE 1. (Right) Gender of victim and perpetrator PERCENTAGES OF REPORTED GENDER OF BOTH VICTIM AND SUSPECTED PERPETRATOR (WHERE KNOWN)

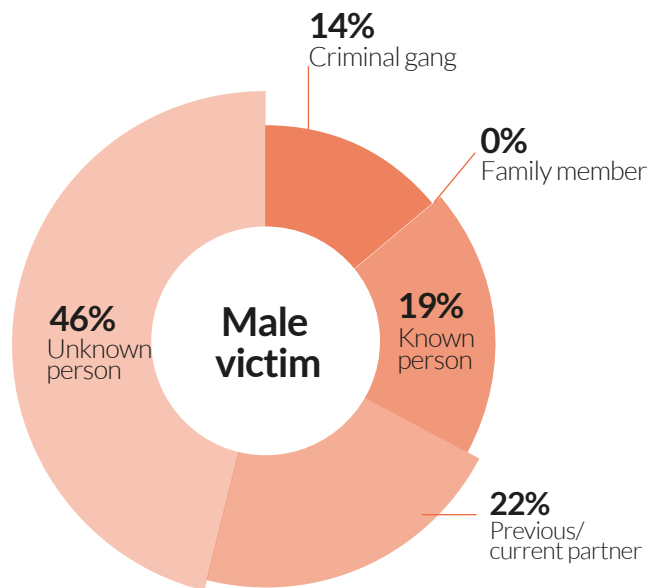
		Perpetrator	
		Male	Female
Victim	Male	7.5%	8.7%
	Female	77%	6.9%

Gender of victim and perpetrator

In cases where the victim has been identified as female, over 50% of cases have also identified the suspected perpetrator of the crime as a current or previous partner. The second most reported suspected perpetrator is a "known person"; which is anyone the victim can identify. This accounts for 25% of cases for female victims. So, in over 80% of cases reported to the Helpline where females are victims of IIA, the suspected perpetrator is someone known to the victim.



Conversely, for male victims 60% report to RPH that the suspected perpetrator is someone they do not know, e.g. criminal gangs or unknown people (until 2019 "unknown people" also included criminal gangs). In 40% of cases, male victims disclose that the suspected perpetrators are known people, with over half of those known people being a previous or current partner.



Gender and suspected perpetrator

Moreover, when RPH reports intimate content for clients, there is a clear gender divide, with female victims having more content shared online than men.

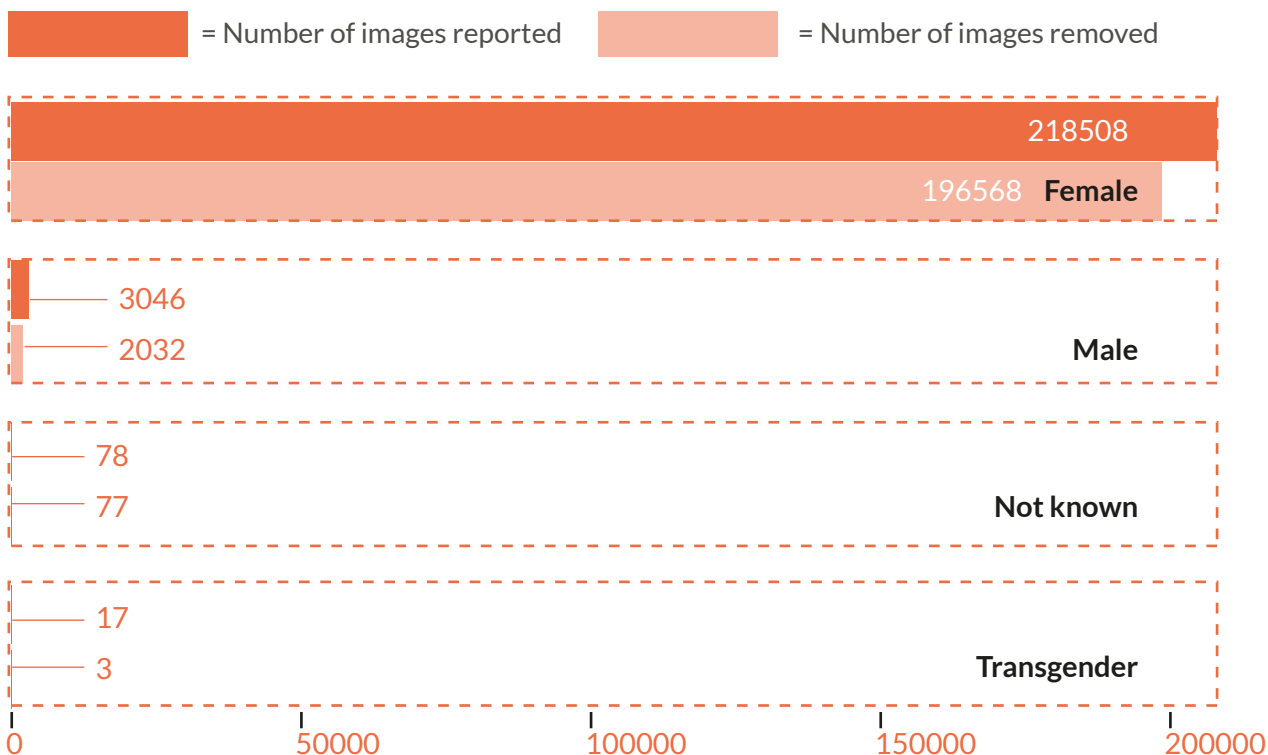
## Intimate images reported

The Helpline reports images for victims of IIA, and throughout the five-year period we reported an average of 42 images for each female victim. In comparison, we reported 1.5 images per person for each male victim. This has left us with extraordinary data, demonstrating that female victims are disproportionately represented in clients to the Helpline and the amount of content shared. The differences are shown in the table below.

Images reported	Male	Female
	1.5	41.9

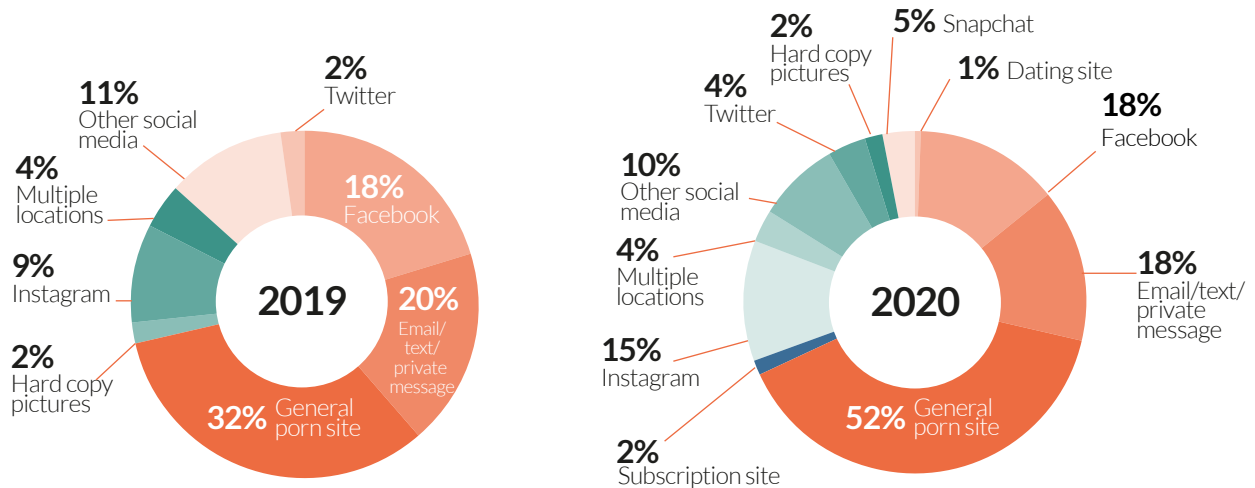
*Intimate images reported per person*

Since the Helpline opened, RPH has reported over 200,000 images for women, whereas for men this figure is just over 3,000. This is not to downplay the fact that one image is devastating, but it demonstrates how different the issue is for women.



*Number of images reported/removed by gender of victim*

It is hard to comprehend the number of images that we report for removal, but we also keep track of where the content was shared when the client was first alerted to the content. For RPH, this is important not only so we can report it, but also so we can feed back to industry how often we receive reports of illegal content being shared. The table below shows in percentage terms where we have found intimate content.



*Location of images shared*

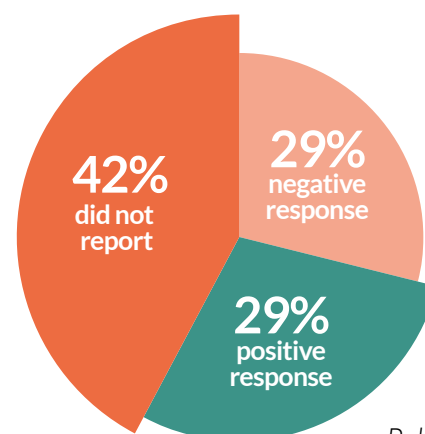
The main destination for shared content is general pornographic sites, which in 2020 made up over 50% of the locations. Social media websites are both close runners, with Facebook and Instagram accounting for 18% and 15% respectively.

The final location to highlight is reports of content shared via private messages – which can include WhatsApp, email or texts; this accounts for 18% of the cases where images were shared in 2020.

RPH always encourage clients to report what is happening to the police, but know that this may not happen, for a variety of reasons. In this report, “unknown” information was excluded from the next graphic for clarity, but it does paint a clear image of victim’s experiences when they report the crime to the police.

## Police responses

Many victims chose not to report the incident to the police, but if they had the courage to report then they would have had a 50% chance of getting a positive or negative response. To be clear, a negative response does not mean the police were unable to pursue an investigation due to any evidential issues (though it may), but it relates more to the attitude shown when the victim reported to the police. Some examples of a negative response would



*Police response*



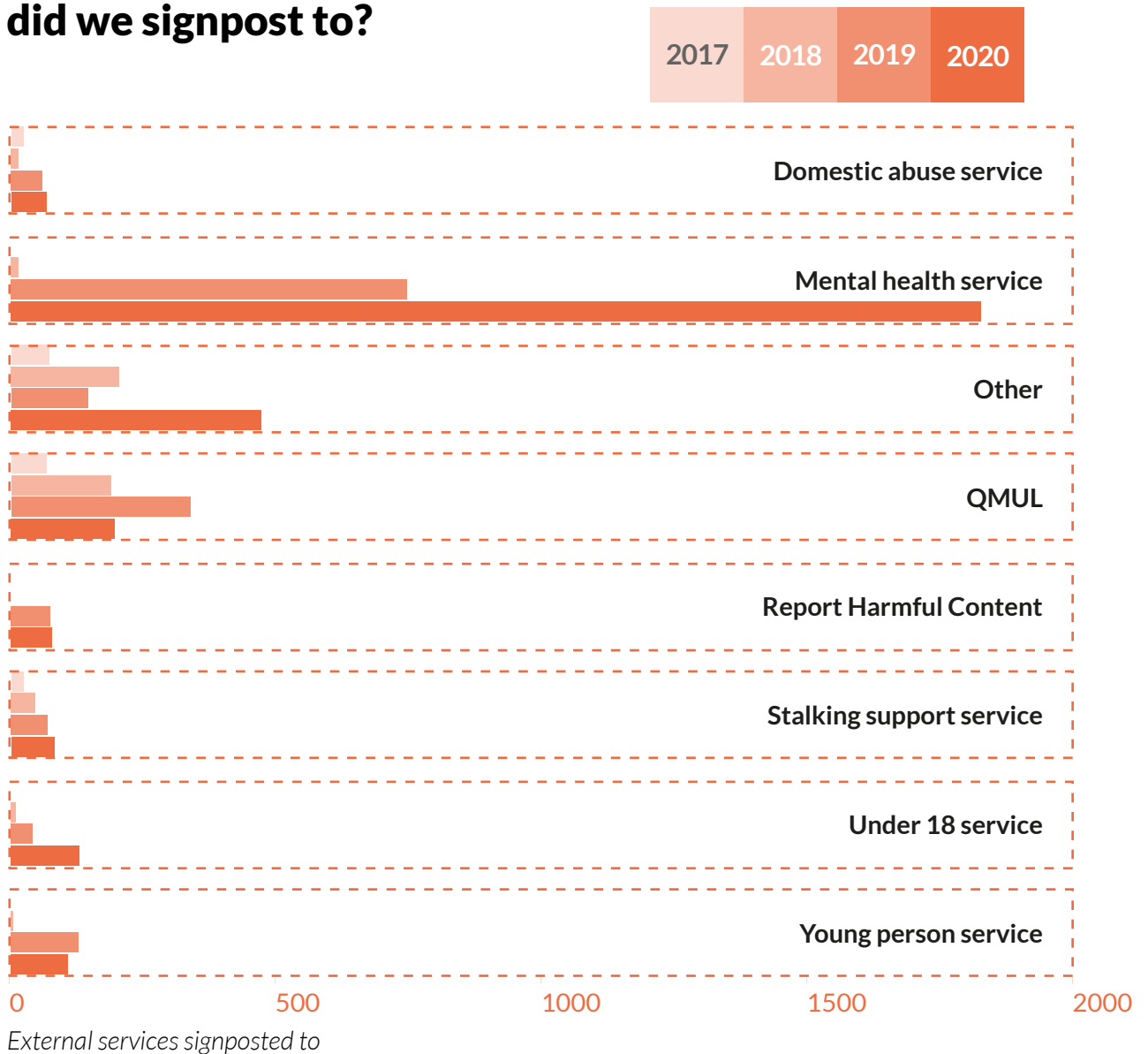
be victim blaming, not being helpful, not knowing the law, or just ignoring the report of the incident. This left many victims very distressed and feeling they had nowhere to go for help and support.

“I was told I should delete my social media, and ‘at least the pictures don’t show my face’ by a police officer, which I think was very unprofessional.”

“I contacted the police and they laughed and said there was nothing they could do.”

**“...a 50% chance of getting a positive or negative response”**

## Which external services did we signpost to?



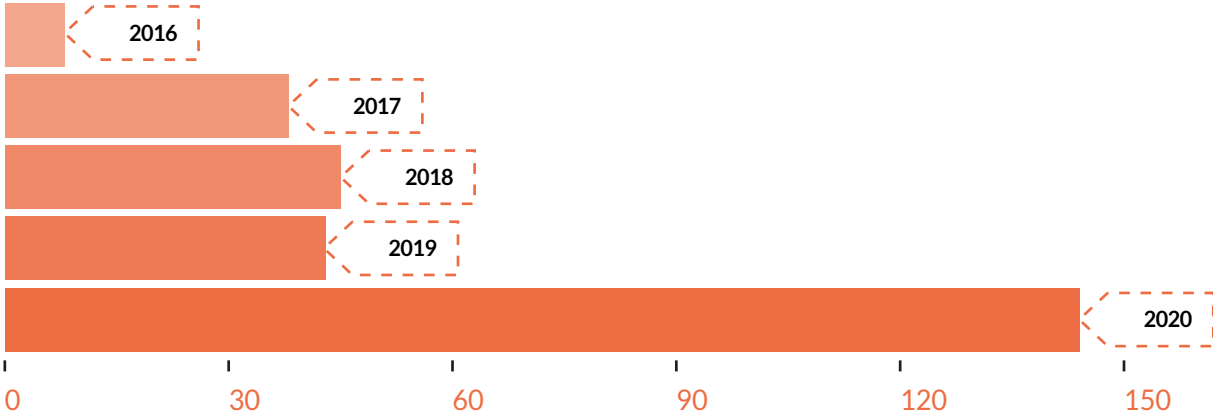
RPH is not an emotional support service and currently we are unable to provide long-term support, so we often signpost to other services that may be able to provide this. The main destination we signpost people to are support services for emotional and mental health, such as Victim Support or a specific mental health service. We understand the long-lasting impact that these incidents can have, and we want to give our clients the best chance of coming through the experience well; but this is what they say:

**“I suffer from anxiety and panic attacks so I can’t stop panicking atm.”**

**“I became defeated and depressed at the extent of the problem.”**

**“...is their end goal to make me try and commit suicide or? I don’t know of any other reason someone would want to do this.”**

The “Other” category encompasses a range of services, including legal advice services, such as Rights of Women, who offer free legal advice to women who have been victims of crime, sexual harassment, or any domestic issues. Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) is the third most signposted-service. QMUL run a project from their Legal Advice Centre known as SPITE (Sharing and Publishing Intimate Images to Embarrass) and RPH has worked with them for many years. Student-led, SPITE offers victims of IIA free legal advice, information about their legal rights and their options for next steps. Though we do not always know the outcome of signposting people to these services, we understand the intersection of harms that clients experience. The referrals RPH make demonstrate that these behaviours do not happen in isolation and clients need holistic support.



*Clients who are under 18*

While RPH is only able to support adult victims, we often receive reports from young people, for several reasons. Firstly, they may now be an adult but were minors in the content and still need support. Secondly, there is a lack of understanding around this crime: sex is legal from 16 – but any nude or partially nude image of an under 18 is classified as child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and is illegal – although ‘sexting’ is now commonplace in many relationships (Anastassiou, 2017). As you can see, reports from minors have skyrocketed over the years, with a 234% case increase from 2019 to 2020. Thankfully, our positive working relationships with services such as the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) mean that we can signpost these young people so they can access the support they need. The IWF are an independent charity that assesses online CSAM and seek to remove it.

# Trends

## Impact of COVID-19

Reports to RPH have increased steadily year on year since we opened. Cases fluctuate throughout the year usually attributable to media coverage but in April 2020 we saw cases almost double.

Almost overnight, RPH saw a large jump in case numbers; and because the Helpline moved to operating an email-only service due to the lockdown, we saw a massive rise in the number of contacts. Why? Well, we cannot be completely sure; the nature of the situation is far more complex than we have data for, but we can offer some anecdotal suggestions.

When the phone lines are open, the transmission of information to each client is easier as conversations are more natural and this keeps additional contacts to a minimum. The nature of an email or any text-based communication can lead to different interpretations of the advice being given which leads RPH to spend more time clarifying and understanding the client's experiences; something which would be easily dealt with when you can hear someone's voice or make quick adjustments to what you are saying.

The next suggestion is that people were spending more time together during a very stressful time. During the lockdown, people were not allowed to leave their houses and people's jobs, income, and futures were uncertain, which put strain on many households across the UK. The incidence of abusive behaviours rose sharply and many helplines saw a rise in cases. The increase of abuse during COVID-19 is considered by some to be a public health crisis (Kumar, 2020).

With this, people who were at home had more time to be online – many aspects of life were only online – which increased the risk of them being subjected to online crime, such as sextortion. Perpetrators also continued to benefit from online anonymity, something that has been frequently cited in psychology research to increase the incidence of anti-social behaviour (Nagomi & Takai, 2008). RPH anticipated that the spike in cases would level off, however it never really did, and the Helpline continued to see a rise as lockdown began to ease.

## **Webcam blackmail (sextortion) and its effect on male victims**

Before lockdown, cases of sextortion accounted for around 13% of cases, but since lockdown RPH have seen a sharp rise to over 17% and in some months over 20%. These are high-stress situations that need immediate results for both the victim and perpetrator. The data shows that 80% of sextortion victims are male and the National Crime Agency (NCA) has disclosed that the men most at risk of falling victim to sextortion are within the age group of 21-30 (The Sun, 2018). There may be several factors contributing to this.

Facilitating a fast-moving online relationship for sexual gratification could be considered as “risk-taking” behaviour, and as the behaviours occur online, there may be a false sense of anonymity that comes from being behind a screen name. This sense of anonymity happens within many online spheres and is known within research to alleviate moral constraints and increase risk which leads to the person behind the keyboard engaging in behaviours that would commonly not happen offline, or as quickly; this includes abuse, trolling, and sexual acts.

Research also shows that men tend to engage in more risk-taking behaviour, and within these “high risk” settings (such as sharing an image showing oneself nude with someone online) the expected enjoyment is higher than that of women (Harris, Jenkins & Glaser, 2006). This may leave younger men at a higher risk of becoming victims of such crimes, due to the risky nature of the engagement, which is something the perpetrators use to their advantage. This is not to say women do not

fall victim to these scams, but the encounter is different: in our experience women fall for longer-term relationship scams. They believe they are a part of a long distance, genuine relationship, and may give money for other reasons (a “sick relative”) and engage in online sexual activity more slowly than male victims because they need to believe the relationship is “real” before engaging in those behaviours.

## **Intimate image abuse as a gendered issue**

It is abundantly clear from the Helpline’s experience that intimate image abuse is a gendered issue, with women making up the majority of victims of this type of abuse from their – predominantly male – previous or current partners. However, historically RPH has not had a significant proportion of LGBTQ+ cases despite research indicating that domestic abuse in same-sex couples is comparable in prevalence to heterosexual couples and is notably male-perpetrated violence (Rolle et al, 2018). To drum it home for you: – when a victim of intimate image abuse comes to RPH and reports images being shared online, the number of images we report is disproportionately higher for women than men, 30 times higher, in fact.

Noting that domestic abuse behaviours are a gendered issue is not a revelation, as intimate image abuse does not happen in isolation. Many helplines disclose that women are the majority victims of male-perpetrated violence and it is well documented in literature internationally (WHO, 2012). For instance, one of the behaviours within domestic abuse is harassment and/or stalking and the National Stalking Helpline (2020) reports that though anyone can be a victim of

stalking, it is a gendered-issue with predominantly female victims, which is also linked to domestic abuse. For the abusers, each behaviour – whether that’s sharing someone’s intimate content, or harassing them – can be considered another way to gain control and abuse their victims.

Gendered abuse has been the focus of many scholars over years, with psychoanalytic theories discussing whether women are masochistic in nature and enjoying creating domestic violence to fulfil their needs (Myhill, 2018). Thankfully now, this victim-blaming mentality has been removed from academic journals (though it still exists within society and the police) with the blame now being placed upon the perpetrator of the violence. The theory of coercive control is well cited, with domestic abusers deploying this tactic to gain control of a relationship that is breaking down, or to retain control in a recently ended relationship. The concept of coercive control has been accepted and has become its own criminal offence in the UK and it is reflected in the cases seen on RPH.

We see this abusive dynamic frequently, with 52% of female victims in 2020 disclosing that the perpetrator is a previous partner, compared to 16% of male victims. With this, female victims report male perpetrators of IIA over 50% of the time, reinforcing the theory that IIA is gendered abuse. Characteristic of other forms of gendered violence, the perpetrator seeks to gain control of the victim by violating their privacy, something that has a huge impact on the victim which never really leaves them.

To offer further support to the argument that this is a gendered crime is the

**“All too frequently we see hateful messages online directed at the women calling them a “slut” or a “dirty whore”**

increasing popularity of anonymous image boards’ objectification of women, something that RPH have termed collector sites. We have always been aware of these boards, but their numbers and size are increasing. The sole purpose of these sites is to categorise women by their location and trade their nude images like a dystopian version of Pokémon. Men discuss women as if they are less-than, mocking how **“they could look their [victim’s] boyfriend in the eye knowing they had seen their missus naked”**, and that women in the images are **“asking for it”**, or **“rape-worthy”**. Sadly, it does not stop there.

**“These people know us all by name, they know who we are, they’ve watched us grow, they shop in the same supermarket as us. We fear everyone, we fear humiliation, we fear judgment but most of all we fear lack of justice.”**

People may actively pursue these victims to gain access to their social media accounts and continue their campaign of harassment. If the information is already known (i.e., in a region-based image forum), these cyber-stalkers will use any means to gain information on the person in the image and use this to expose and humiliate them. All too frequently we see hateful messages online directed at the women calling them a “slut” or a “dirty whore”, with their personal information attached which they do solely to degrade them further.

Many women have come to us outlining the paradigm shifts they have had to make to how they use the internet. They now fear 'friend' and 'message requests' in case it's someone alluding to their content or using their handles for more "exposure" clicks. Though this type of behaviour would be seen as reprehensible in the offline world, in these disturbing forums users are commended for their efforts in finding every detail about the women, linking to other sites that contain more extreme images, or providing them with download files for their own viewing pleasure – which then can't be removed or can even be re-uploaded.

With this amount of evidence of the abuse and violation women face when their most intimate moments are shared, one may think they would be commended for their bravery in reporting such atrocities to the police. Unfortunately, our feedback from victims shows the huge backlash they can face. Victims affected by this crime have a multitude of barriers to overcome when it comes to reporting to the police: victims may experience further abuse from the perpetrator if they report the crime, especially if their report is not taken seriously or with sensitivity.

## Barriers to reporting IIA

When reporting abuse to the police, or continuing through criminal proceedings, the main barriers victims experience are rooted in the fear of judgment or of further harm to themselves (McGlynn, 2017). Victims can face the fear of judgement from the police, family, friends, and others close to them, which we know to be a key factor holding victims back from reporting. Worse, when a victim of IIA has the courage to report it to the police, too often they are faced with police who are untrained, unsupportive, and disrespectful to already suffering victims:

in 2020, 47% of victims who disclosed they had reported to the police felt they had a negative response. Clients approaching RPH have reported that the police have blamed them for sharing the images, given the perpetrator notice before they have arrived to search their devices, or just told them it is not against the law and there is nothing they can do. This leaves victims feeling that they are "overreacting" or only have themselves to blame. If a victim comes to us and reports feeling this way, we will always put them straight: it is never the victim's fault if their images are shared outside an intimate relationship without consent: it is against the law and their rights should be protected.

**"I have contacted the police who were of no help and only unsettled me further."**

**"I reported the issue to the police and they have been very unhelpful and blamed the victim for sharing the images."**

**"I've tried speaking to the police but the man said to me that's why I need to be careful sending things because once they're out there they're out there. It was 9 years ago and I absolutely was a child so I felt like the blame was being put on me."**

Victims can fear further abuse from the perpetrator if their case is not taken seriously, knowing that the police may gather evidence and interview the person but not do anything to protect the safety of the victim involved. The victims may also not want to get the perpetrator "in trouble" but would rather just have the content removed so they can all "move on with their lives". We completely understand this and know that reporting to the police is not right for everyone. We will never turn a victim away if they are not going to report to the police, equally we will always help them in reporting their shared content if this is what they want to do.

## The gaps in the law

We have seen that victims are sometimes not treated with compassion and their reports may not be taken seriously. Regrettably, the law as it currently stands is not fit for purpose. For example, a key aspect is the “intent to cause distress”. Though this may sound trivial or obvious, this statement can provide an easy “out” for the police to take no further action; the perpetrator can state that they “didn’t think the victim would be upset” or “it was just a laugh between friends”, which gives them a valid defence and leaves victims unsupported and without justice. It is clear to RPH that although the intent may not be to cause distress, or that intent cannot be proved, the act does cause enormous, long-term distress and humiliation. This barrier, and its failure to provide justice for victims, is one of the contributing factors to why prosecution rates for this crime are so low: a very poor 8% of crimes reported resulting in a charge (FOI, 2019).

This offence is also categorised as a communications offence, though we would strongly argue that it should be a sexual offence. As it stands, victims have no automatic right to anonymity leaving them further exposed, violated, and in the public eye, which directly mirrors the abuse to which they have already been subjected.

Threats to share intimate images as a specific offence has been given considerable attention by support organisations and government. The domestic abuse service, Refuge campaigned for threats to share to be included as part of the Domestic Abuse

Bill and it was one of the proposals put forward by the Law Commission in their consultation. In April 2021, the revised Domestic Abuse Act received Royal Assent meaning threats to share intimate images (section 69 of the Act) are against the law, and this came into effect in June 2021.

## Subscription “leaks” and exposing sex workers

RPH supports sex workers who have been victims of intimate image abuse. It is important to advise sex workers about how to stay safe online, so they have the tools to feel informed and empowered, no matter what their choice.

One type of sex work where explicit content is created rose exponentially in popularity during 2020, largely due to the national pandemic-induced lockdown. The lockdown was associated with a lack of work, redundancies and street sex workers moving to online sex work to maintain an income.

In this year, one online content creator platform, OnlyFans, saw a massive increase in traffic: in May 2020, the site was gaining 7,000–8,000 new content creators per day, according to COO Tom Stokely (Buzzfeed News 2020). Alongside this, RPH saw an increase in demand for our service from content creators who had their copyright violated by their patrons. Unfortunately, though the content was behind a paywall, it was not secured from screenshots or people sharing the content

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outside of the platform. It meant that anyone with access to the images on the platform was able to share them elsewhere, a large concern for content creators' privacy (BBC News Wales, 2020).

**“Unfortunately for the victims...this content would not be in breach of the law”**

Unfortunately for the victims unless the content was taken from a private situation the sharing of this content would not be in breach of the law on intimate images and RPH has limited means to request removal of the content. Commercial content being re-shared is classified as a copyright issue rather than a criminal one which greatly reduces our powers to remove images in these cases.





# *Helpline projects*

Over our five years, RPH has been a part of many projects. Some have been associated with raising funds for the Helpline to support victims and others have raised awareness of the issues and advised specific vulnerable groups such as sex workers and university students.

## **2017 CrowdFunder campaign**

The Revenge Porn Helpline was initially funded by the Government Equalities Office until 2016 with the intention that the Helpline would become self-funding. It was clear the Helpline offered a much-needed service and the RPH CrowdFunder campaign was built to raise additional funds. Thankfully, negotiations with government resulted in an extension of funding which ensured we can remain open to support victims.

## **Facebook pilot project**

Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in the world; it incorporates Instagram, Messenger and WhatsApp and allows for billions to connect globally. You have everyone there – from your friends from school to your grandparents – and for a lot of victims, this is a place where they feel at most risk of their intimate content being shared. Whether this is a victim of sextortion or a volatile ex threatening to share private images, the impacts can be devastating when you know your family are literally a click away.

Knowing this, Facebook took responsibility for users' privacy and the sharing of images on their platforms. They do not allow private images on any of their sites and have designated reporting forms. Facebook also developed 'hashing' technology which they later made open source. This meant that intimate images that were shared on their platforms and reported could be blocked from being re-shared. From this beginning, they developed the pilot project Not Without My Consent which extended the hashing technology to pre-emptively block intimate images where there was a realistic threat of sharing. Facebook now works with specialist online safety services around the world who act as referral routes for clients to ensure their private images are not shared on Facebook, Instagram or Messenger. The Revenge Porn Helpline has been working with Facebook since the start and since 2017 we have referred nearly 200 cases to the project. We continue to offer this as an important tool to provide peace of mind and protection to those violated by threats to share.

## Research

Although this is the first report for RPH, this is not the first piece of research undertaken for the Helpline. In 2019 Dr Elena Sharratt - a digital sociologist at the University of Exeter - worked with RPH and POSH to produce a vital piece of research into understanding what we saw on both Helplines. The report was both comparative and qualitative as it looked at differences and similarities for adults and young victims of image abuse. You can find her report in the reference list.

## Website refresh

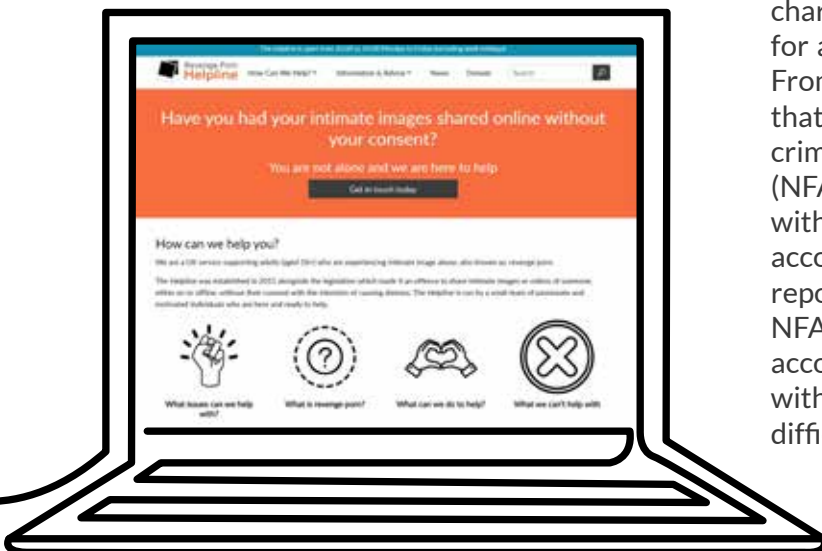
As everything changes around us, it is important we keep up to date with changes and trends. Throughout 2019, we had a major overhaul of our website. We rewrote older content and added many more advice pages to offer immediate support to victims, as we know that many clients reach out overnight and at weekends when the Helpline is not open. At the same time, we made the website more visually appealing, using softer colours and user-friendly interfaces to make the website easy and pleasing to navigate through.

## Freedom of information requests from police forces

We know from our clients that incidents of intimate image abuse may not be taken seriously when reported to the police or may not be dealt with in a sensitive manner. We were interested in understanding why this was the sort of experience many of our clients reported so sent a number of freedom of information (FOIs) requests for details pertaining to the handling of cases when the disclosure of private images without consent was reported to the police. The following percentages came from those FOIs where supplied.

The responses to the FOIs confirmed what we had already seen but was no less shocking. Reported crimes for the sharing of private sexual images without consent with the intent to cause distress (section 33, CJA 2015) have been increasing substantially since the law came into force in 2015.

The same is not the case for the arrest or charge rates which have been in gradual decline since 2015. In 2015, 19% of cases led to arrests but by 2017 this figure had fallen to just 11% of cases. The rate of charging for this crime has only been 8% for all reported crimes in the UK in 2017. From the collected data, we discovered that the two main reasons why reported crimes were marked as No Further Action (NFA) were lack of evidence and the victim withdrawing support. Lack of evidence accounted for nearly 15% of cases reported through 2015-18 being marked NFA, and the victim withdrawing support accounted for 25% of cases. The withdrawal of support reflects the difficulties highlighted above for victims in



seeing their cases through, but the figures also highlight how important the collection of evidence by the victim is in support of the police's investigation.

We aim to collect this information year on year to monitor progress and we hope that ultimately more cases will result in charge and prosecution which will serve to both protect more victims and deter more perpetrators in the future.

## University resources

RPH know that issues surrounding IIA do not happen in isolation, and we wanted to provide vulnerable groups with advice. Following a number of high profile incidents in universities that saw a range of online abuses including the sharing of intimate images, harassment and rape threats, we felt it was important to provide information specific to students and universities to give them the tools to approach subjects that may otherwise be considered sensitive or taboo. We worked with partner organisations across the UK to provide this important advice and guidance for students.

In 2019 RPH worked with the National Stalking Helpline, the National Crime Agency, Report Harmful Content, and the Professionals Online Safety Helpline to create a range of downloadable, or printable, postcards that offer advice and support on issues such as: intimate image abuse, stalking and safety online. These resources are presented on small, discreet illustrated postcards that give advice and signposting to whoever may need it.

The range was expanded in 2020 to include advice for students who are also sex workers (online or offline), how to manage your online reputation and hate speech. The resources were made

available on our website, but we also provided a free sample pack to each university. Following the launch, we have been approached by a number of universities who have invested in more of our resources, and others who have asked for further advice. There is much more to do, but it is a very promising start.

## Dedicated support for sex workers

In April 2019, we began expanding our knowledge and service provision for sex workers who are particularly vulnerable to online abuse. Sex workers can be affected by intimate image abuse through acts of voyeurism, images being leaked from creator sites and threats of exposing sex worker status using images. In the period of April 2019 to December 2020 we received 83 cases from sex workers or professionals supporting sex workers.

We have been working with Dr Teela Sanders at the University of Leicester. As part of her work, Dr Sanders organised frequent practitioner group meetings for organisations and services working with sex workers from around the country to meet and exchange issues, challenges, and network for advice. Joining this group has been beneficial and enabled us to learn about issues faced by outreach practitioners working on the frontline with sex workers. This has allowed us to expand our knowledge and provide specific advice for practitioners and sex workers as well as helping us to develop a dedicated webpage to host this advice.

Following increased media attention towards the issue of student sex work, we began to direct our focus on this group who are potentially vulnerable to a range of harms, including intimate image abuse. We used our knowledge and expertise to

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contribute towards the work of Dr Sanders and the Student Sex Worker research group on a focused piece of work to create toolkits aimed at providing information and advice for students and staff in higher education institutions.

We have also produced our own guidance on Students and Sex Work within our University Student Online Welfare advice pack. The advice and information we provide aims to equip students with the knowledge to make informed decisions without either promoting or condoning sex work.

## **SWOSH project: Sex Worker Online Safety Hub**

Our latest project this year is the Sex Worker Online Safety Hub (SWOSH). SWOSH aims to provide neutral and non-judgmental online safety advice and support for sex workers and content creators living in the UK. We are working with adult services providers and platforms to increase help and support on their pages and to work with sex workers

and sex worker outreach services to provide training on key issues, resources and build a network of support. The first steps of this project are the development of a dedicated website ([www.swosh.org.uk](http://www.swosh.org.uk)) and the further development of our networks with adult platforms and sex worker support services.

## **Working partnerships**

Intimate image abuse does not happen in isolation and there is a wide range of other behaviours that clients bring to the Helpline. Knowing this, we work collaboratively with other organisations to ensure we are giving holistic support and advice to our clients; we have already defined some of these partnerships when discussing our university resources, but we also work with other organisations, industry, and academic settings to provide training on intimate image abuse, and receive reciprocal training in return. RPH have worked with many services including:

- The Muslim Women's Network
- The National Stalking Helpline
- The National Crime Agency
- The University of Leicester
- Queen Mary University London
- Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (USA)
- Netsafe (New Zealand)
- eSafety Commissioner (Australia)



# *The future of the Helpline*

The fast-changing landscape of intimate image abuse requires us to try to predict future trends to ensure our support for clients is agile enough to adapt to evolving issues. We are keen to participate in any new projects that inform wider audiences on what intimate image abuse is and the impact it can have as these will enable us to update and improve our services.

## **The value of our service**

RPH cannot support everyone affected and there are limits to what we can do. Our service is very niche, but for anyone who has been or is being affected by this type of abuse, the service we provide is often life-changing. A large number of our clients have left positive reviews of the service which reveal the value of the support we provide:

**“After contacting you, you made me realise I should stop blaming myself, sharing images with someone you once trusted does not give them any right to share with anybody. In fact, they should delete once asked. Thank you for all your help and advice. I appreciate it.”**

**“It was just nice to have someone to tell - it's quite a lonely experience.”**

**“You save people dignity and lives.”**

**“Thank you for everything you do. All I needed that night when it all happened was a friendly voice on the other end of the phone to give me advice and tell me I was okay. You gave me the confidence to stand up for myself and to open up to my family about what had happened. I felt less alone after speaking to your team.”**

RPH continues to adapt and develop its services as it is important that the support we offer evolves and broadens to meet the needs of clients and the developing online landscape. The impact of COVID-19 meant the Helpline offered a limited service and this demonstrated how important it was to clients to speak to someone on the phone. The phone line reopened in 2021.



## **Adapting to the newly emerging trends**

Technology – and the behaviours associated with it – is advancing at an unstoppable rate and we are always playing catch up. The law, as outlined previously, is lagging behind the technological curve. Further, the behaviours associated with intimate image abuse are also developing at pace. The work we do keeps us up to date with new technologies and behaviours and allows us to adapt to the trends relating to intimate image abuse so we can provide the best support to our clients.

One behaviour that has developed in the last few years is that of “collectors”. This is one of the most dehumanising aspects of image abuse that we see. Perpetrators not only see the victims as an object for abuse, but also as a prize to be passed around. With this comes some of the more secretive aspects of IIA, as the proprietors of this content hide large folders of victims’ images behind pay walls, or in downloadable zip files. This not only makes content more difficult to find and report, but it makes it much harder to hold the perpetrators accountable. As a result, this content and the demeaning commentary continue to increase at pace. Thankfully, we are beginning to see some encouraging new technology from industry which can remove and block content, and we hope this will help reduce re-sharing rates.

Another new technology that is fast growing in popularity is “deepfakes” which can be used to create pornographic material. These use artificial intelligence

learning systems to create a “fake” image and this technology has worrying potential. It allows for the uncannily accurate mapping of someone’s face and voice onto situations that have not actually occurred. Deepfakes have been used in politics, pop culture and, most commonly, in the creation of pornography (Sensity, 2019). There is no law in England and Wales to cover images doctored in this way (though the law in Scotland does), which is a real concern, but we hope that changes in the future will support victims of deepfaked intimate imagery. We remain bound by the law and until it catches up with the technology, our powers are limited. However, we will continue to monitor these emerging technologies and work with our networks to develop and provide updated education and prevention strategies to support our clients now and in the future.

## **Working collaboratively with other organisations**

RPH and our partner organisations all work towards a common goal: to support and advise. RPH welcomes collaborations with other organisations to build practitioners’ knowledge and develop best practice and we understand the importance of these crossovers. They help us to gain a greater knowledge of associated issues enabling us to be better informed about the organisations we commonly signpost to, and they give us the opportunity to work with different services for training and support.

RPH continue to have exciting talks with industry around blocking content before it is shared, as well as developing crawler technologies to remove content from websites. The scale of these projects is as yet unknown, but this work is becoming priority for many of our industry partners.

We are also looking to continue our work with academics to produce research on intimate image abuse, allowing the trends we see emerging every day to be brought out into the light. In doing this we raise awareness of the issues which goes to inform industry, government and the wider public.

## Law Commission review

We know that the law on intimate image abuse does not fit the crimes that are being reported, leaving many victims unsupported and without justice and the Law Commission have been tasked by government to review the law as it stands. They have asked for our input along with a wide range of other stakeholders, including victims, academics, law enforcement and support services to inform their recommendations. Currently, the Law Commission has released a consultation paper outlining where the gaps in the law fail victims. These include:

- Deep faked/ photoshopped imagery not being considered illegally produced content.
- The “intent to cause distress” allows many perpetrators to get away with this crime by considering distress as a by-product of sharing intimate content.

- Disclosing private sexual images is not a sexual offence, but rather a criminal offence, which does not allow anonymity for victims.

## StopNCII.org

RPH have been working with Meta to develop a new tool where adults can create a unique identifier of their own private sexual images directly from their device: StopNCII.org (Stop Non-consensual Intimate Image abuse). This venture gives users the control to block their images from being shared on partnering platforms. RPH aims to collaborate with organisations and industry partners internationally to support users collectively. The tool is due to launch in late 2021 with support from Meta and will be a global step in the initiative to stop non-consensual intimate image abuse.

## Supporting LGBTQ+

RPH plans more work to support marginalised groups experiencing intimate image abuse. We hope to work with LGBTQ+ organisations to ensure their support and any future resources are based upon the lived experience of victims.

## Tech for Good

Following a successful bid to the Comic Relief Tech for Good campaign, RPH and our sister service Report Harmful Content are working on how to better support our clients outside of office hours. We are exploring technological solutions for both services, but our aim is to offer advice, support and signposting 24/7. This is important as over 60% of RPH's cases occur outside of office hours and we need to give those in desperate need an immediate point of contact for help and advice.

# Conclusions

In our first five years, the Revenge Porn Helpline has become an invaluable service that seeks to give people back their power and voice within a violating and isolating experience. In undertaking this report, RPH aimed to highlight not only what we see daily, but also what we expect to see in the future.

This report has outlined the gendered nature of intimate image abuse and has shown that not only is it not slowing down, but that the behaviours are becoming more complex. Through our data, we have shown that both technology and behaviours have been developing rapidly, with both deepfake technology and collector behaviour being issues we expect to see more of in the future.

At the same time, we see more adaptive technologies within the industry that seek to support victims of images shared online, and that also act as a preventative measure for many others. These technologies will be a much-needed route for victims to protect their privacy online before they become a victim of this demeaning crime.

We need to join the dots now and identify the potential risks and harms of violence, understanding that these do not happen in isolation. We want to work with other services to educate young people and adults in understanding inequalities that may contribute to harm and understand what a healthy relationship and relationship breakdown looks like so they are better prepared and know how this sort of abuse can occur. We want to continue working with other organisations who have the same goals so together we can develop strategies and tools to aid victims to report and remove content more efficiently.

RPH wants to continue broadening its remit to encompass the trends and issues we are seeing. We hope that the Law Commission review will seriously consider the recommendations we have supported to adapt the law and future proof it against further change, such as deepfake technology. This will demonstrate to victims that they are heard and supported in law and will give everyone a clear dividing line of what is acceptable behaviour and what is not.

We will continue our work to be a significant voice in shifting cultural attitudes around online intimate content. It is time that the victim-blaming mentality was eradicated, and we will work towards the elimination of this type of abuse. We will work with our partners and stakeholders whilst continuing to develop our support for victims, research and available resources.

The Helpline has achieved a lot in its five years: we have responded to over 8,000 clients to whom we have been given help and support when they needed it most. We have removed over 200,000 intimate images from the internet and built a network of industry partners, support organisations, stakeholders and supporters. We have raised awareness of the issues across the UK and internationally through media and conferences and are consulted with about the development of law and policy.

We are hopeful that in the next five years, we will have a solid platform that gives us the resources to help us to help more people, make new connections with partners to protect victims and enable us to innovate to create positive change.





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