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Dublin City University

DCU IONAD FRITHBHULAÍOCHT
DCU ANTI-BULLYING CENTRE

The Gendered Experiences of Image-based Sexual Abuse: State of the Research and Evidence-based Recommendations

Annual report for the Department of Justice

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DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre is located in Dublin City University's Institute of Education and is a university recognised national and global centre of excellence in education and research on bullying and online safety. The Centre hosts the UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools and Cyberspace and the International Journal on Bullying Prevention.

The aim of the Centre is to contribute to solving real-world problems of bullying and online safety through collaboration with an extensive community of academic and industry partnerships. Over the past 25 years, staff affiliated with the Centre have undertaken research on school, workplace, and homophobic bullying, as well as many other issues relating to bullying and online safety. The Centre receives funding from the Government of Ireland, the European Commission, the Irish Research Council, the Health Services Executive, Rethink Ireland and industry partners Meta and Vodafone Ireland Foundation.

The Observatory on Cyberbullying, Cyberhate and Online Harassment is a project within DCU Anti-Bullying Centre and was established in 2021 to provide up-to-date research and advice as well as monitor the impact of anti-cyberbullying laws and regulations. More specifically, the Observatory focuses on researching the prevalence, contours, functions, and psychosocial impacts of cyberbullying, cyberhate, and online harassment. It also aims to explore the impact of laws and regulations on those who engage in or are targeted by cyberbullying, cyberhate, and online harassment.

The Observatory is funded by the Department of Justice following the ratification of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 and partly by the Department of Education under the Action Plan on Bullying (2013). The Observatory currently comprises Dr Angela Mazzone (Chair), Dr Maja Brandt Andreasen, Dr Mairéad Foody, Dr Tijana Milosevic, and Prof James O'Higgins Norman.

Executive Summary

The aim of this report is firstly to provide an overview of facets, prevalence and legislation on image-based sexual abuse in Ireland and internationally. Secondly, the report aims to discuss the research into the gendered aspect of experiences of image-based sexual abuse. Thirdly the report provides recommendations based on existing research.

The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020[1] (Coco's Law) criminalises the recording, distribution, publishing, or threatening to publish intimate images without consent (Section 2 and 3). In addition to this, the Act criminalises offensive and threatening communications whether they are directed at a person or shared about that person (Section 4).

Consent is central to the terminology of the report which distinguishes between two types of image sharing: consensual and non-consensual sharing of sexual images. Consensual sharing of sexual images[2] includes self-produced images or texts that are sent to (prospective) sexual partners in order to flirt, arouse or initiate sexual activity (Bianchi et al., 2016; Challenor et al., 2018; Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018).

Non-consensual sharing of intimate images falls under what this report refers to as image-based sexual abuse. This includes the following types of behaviour: a) taking or creating images without consent – including digitally altered images (known as 'fake nudes' or 'fake porn'), (b) sharing sexual images without consent (including hacked images), (c) threatening to take, create or share sexual images, including sexual extortion (coercing or threatening individuals into sharing sexual images (d) unwanted sexual images, including cyberflashing and unsolicited 'dick pics', and (e) unwanted solicitation for sexual images, also referred to as pressured sexting.

1 **irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/act/32/enacted/en/print**

2 Often referred to as 'sexting', but for the purpose of this report, referred to as consensual sharing of sexual images.

The research evidences that women (especially younger women) are disproportionately the targets of image-based sexual abuse (Foody et al., 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021a; Powell et al., 2020). Research finds that norms about gender, masculinity, and femininity among youth dictate the consequences which are experienced differently for boys and girls: Images shared of boys have little to no repercussion while images shared of girls tend to be met by slut shaming and victim blaming. Moreover, while girls could feel pressured into sharing images, boys might feel pressured into soliciting and sharing images of girls as this can function as a way to secure sexual capital, confirm, heterosexual masculinity and create homosocial bonding between male peer groups (Ringrose et al., 2021a; 2021b; 2021c).

This report concludes that while legislation and criminal justice is significant for regulating and penalising image-based sexual abuse, it is crucial to introduce education and prevention programs in order to fully address the issue. The report recommends securing proper emotional, psychological and legal supports for those who have been harmed and wish to seek help or report the abuse. Most significantly, the report refers to research-based evidence that teaching consent and training school staff in the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) lessons in schools is crucial for preventing image-based sexual abuse and providing the education that youth want, need, and which will make them feel safe enough to disclose and report (Ringrose et al., 2021a).

Aim of the Report

The present report has three main aims:

— To provide an overview of the facets, prevalence and legislation on image-based sexual abuse in Ireland and internationally

— To discuss the research into the gendered aspect of experiences of image-based sexual abuse

— To provide recommendations based on existing research

While the Observatory takes a broad approach to the issues of cyberbullying, cyberhate, and online harassment, this report focuses specifically on image-based sexual abuse and the gendered aspect of this. Image-based sexual abuse (what in legal terms is referred to as non-consensual sharing of intimate images and sometimes colloquially as 'revenge porn') includes a variety of experiences of having an image (nude, semi-nude, intimate sexual moment) shared online to one or multiple people without giving consent and without having any control over the image. This is particularly a problem for young girls (Foody et al., 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021a; Powell et al., 2020) (although, it is worth pointing out that there have also been male targets) and has now been criminalised under Coco's Law. While intimate images are also shared consensually between sexual partners and might be beneficial in terms of sexual expression, non-consensual sharing (and other aspects of image-based sexual abuse) can have serious consequences for the targets.

This report provides contemporary and up-to-date research into the experiences and prevalence of image-based sexual abuse followed by a discussion on how this phenomenon is gendered. The report concludes by offering research-based recommendations for how to tackle image-based abuse – both legally but also via educational programmes.

Image-based sexual abuse and social media in 2021

In addition to the increased research interest in image-based sexual abuse, in recent years there has been an increased media attention on the phenomenon as well as a focus on the potential responsibility of social media platforms. One high-profile example was a leak of the so-called Facebook Files in September 2021 (published in **The Wall Street Journal**) that indicated (among other things) that Facebook (now Meta) was aware of the platform Instagram's harmful effect on some teenage users (especially girls) (Lima, 2021; Wells, et al., 2021). The Files showed that Facebook had conducted internal research for years finding that Instagram users with existing body issues were more likely to experience poor mental health and wellbeing as a result of being on Instagram. The main criticism of the company by whistle-blower Frances Haugen, was the fact that Facebook knew about the potential negative effect on some teenage girls without intervening. It is important to note, however, that negative body image is caused by a great variety of factors (not limited to social media use) and that there is a need for greater clarity with the research being undertaken within social media companies.

Another example of increased media attention in the past year was the commencement of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law), which saw the culmination of the activism of Jackie Fox, mother of the late Nicole (Coco) Fox Fenlon, as Coco's Law was enacted on 10th of February 2021. The tragic story of Nicole Fox Fenlon (who took her own life in 2018 after three years of online and offline bullying and harassment) caught media attention when her mother, Jackie Fox, initiated a campaign raising awareness on the issue and urging policy makers to take action (Coyne, 2020; Dunphy, 2021). There was no specific law in place in Ireland at the time to address online harassment and image-based sexual abuse and this increased the need to legislate on the issue. A new bill was proposed, which eventually became Coco's law – in honour of Nicole Fox Fenlon. The Act was signed into law on the 28th of December 2020 and commenced by order of the Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee, TD, on 10th February 2021.

The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law)

The main focus of Coco's Law is the non-consensual sharing of intimate images and threatening and offensive communication[3].The Act defines an image as either a photograph, a video or a digital representation and that an intimate image portrays a nude or semi-nude person, or a person engaged in sexual activity (Section 1). The Act criminalises two degrees of non-consensual sharing of images. The first degree is the distribution, publishing, or threatening to publish intimate images (Section 2). This Section requires an intent to cause harm, (including psychological harm) or being reckless as to whether harm is caused. The second degree is the recording, distributing or publishing of intimate images without consent (Section 3). Under Section 3, an offence that seriously interferes with the victim's peace or privacy or caused them distress or alarm is considered to be a crime. Section 2 and 3 of Coco's Law has been added to the Domestic Violence Act (2018) making it an aggravated factor if the offender is or was in an intimate relationship with the victim.

The Act also criminalises communication (online and offline) which can be considered threatening or grossly offensive, whether this is sent directly to a person or whether this is published about the person (Section 4).

Other initiatives in Ireland

Leading up to the ratification of Coco's Law, other initiatives, official and legal, have been established in Ireland that address issues relating to various aspects of image-based sexual abuse. Of the official initiatives, the Action Plan on Bullying (2013), initiated by the Department of Education and Skills, first included cyberbullying as a phenomenon to be considered alongside offline bullying. The National Advisory Council for Online Safety (NACOS)[4] was established in 2018 as part of the Action Plan for Online Safety 2018-2019. The council's role is to provide advice, identify emerging issues, help create online safety guidance materials, and communicate key findings of research to the Irish Government.

3 https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/act/32/enacted/en/print

4 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ebe58-national-advisory-council-for-online-safety-nacos/

In this respect, NACOS has recently published its 'Report of a National Survey of Children, their Parents and Adults regarding Online Safety'. This report, launched by Minister Catherine Martin TD, was commissioned following a recommendation put forward by NACOS that acknowledged a need for up-to-date research and evidence about the state of online safety in Ireland. Overall, this research provides an overview of how young people and adults in Ireland, particularly children, access and use the internet (more information on the findings of this report can be found below).

In terms of further initiatives addressing image-based sexual abuse, the Department of Justice has recently worked with An Garda Síochána and Hotline.ie[5] to establish a formal online reporting channel for intimate images disseminated without consent. This reporting channel provides victims of online abuse with the opportunity to report the harmful content for takedown only, or for reporting to An Garda Síochána. After assessing each case, An Garda Síochána conducts a criminal investigation where a complaint relating to the case is made and all relevant evidence is secured for use in any future court proceedings that may arise in relation to the formal complaint. This reporting channel represents a first iteration (a Minimum Viable Product), which may be further developed in time, subject to operational matters and funding.

Of the legal initiatives, the non-consensual taking and sharing of sexual images do, in some cases, fall under what is legally considered child pornography. The Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998, as amended, criminalises downloading naked or sexual images of a person under the age of 18. While these legal initiatives are in place to protect children, the fact that they do not distinguish between consensual and non-consensual taking and sharing of images poses a paradox for teenagers above the age of consent (i.e., 17), but younger than 18, who might take and send images to their partners as a way of expressing their sexuality, given that these could legally be considered to produce child pornography (Sciacca et al., 2021).

5 Hotline.ie works at the intersection of online service providers, civil society and law enforcement working together to ensure that child online sexual materials are promptly removed at source and that the children in the imagery can be identified and protected.

It is worth noting that Ireland is one of only a small number of Member States to have fully transposed Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography[6]. This transposition has been achieved through administrative and legislative means, the latter being the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017[7].Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Catherine Martin TD, published the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill on 12 January 2022. The Bill addresses the majority of the 33 recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sports and Media in their pre-legislative scrutiny report of the General Scheme of the Bill. The Bill introduces a regulatory framework for online safety which aims to tackle the spread and amplification of some types of harmful online content, including, content which is criminal to share, serious cyberbullying material, material promoting eating disorders, and material promoting self-harm and suicide. Minister Martin has now received government approval to commence recruitment of an Online Safety Commissioner, who will be appointed to set binding online safety codes for how to address these issues as well as to impose sanctions on those who do not comply with the rules[8].

6 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32011L0093

7 https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/2/enacted/en/html

8 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d8e4c-online-safety-and-media-regulation-bill/

Consensual Sharing of intimate Images

It is important to note that conceptually two types of image sharing exist in online spaces: consensual and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. In other words, consent is essential to understanding how they differ. The non-consensual sharing of intimate images – referred to here as image-based sexual abuse, is discussed in the section below ('Image-Based Sexual Abuse). A problematic conflation of the two concepts, what Hasinoff (2015) refers to as the "erasing of consent" tends to occur in media discourse as well as prevention programmes that tend to advice against engaging in consensual sharing of sexual images. Uniformly condemning all types of image-sharing as harmful might also be a result of the criminalisation of sexting for anyone under the age of 17[9]. Consensual sharing of intimate images is usually referred to as (consensual) 'sexting' (Ringrose et al., 2021a). This includes self-produced images, text or emojis that are sent to sexual partners or to prospective sexual partners in order to flirt, arouse or initiate sexual activity (Bianchi et al., 2016; Challenor et al., 2018; Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Sexting is increasingly used by adolescents as a way of flirting or signalling interest in the other person and as a means of initiating sexual activity (Bianchi et al., 2016). Researchers document how the consensual exchange of sexts in private can be a way for adolescent to express their sexuality and form intimacy (Burkett, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Villacampa, 2017).

A recent report published by NACOS (2021) showed that 8% of children (6% of boys and 9% of girls) aged 11-17 received a sexual message, image or video in the past 12 months, with older children receiving such content more often (15% of children aged 15-17 reported receiving sexual images, videos or text). Of those receiving such content, 68% reported that this happened on social media. In terms of receiving unwanted requests for a naked image of themselves, 4% of boys and 6% of girls reported receiving such requests either once or a few times in the past year. Most of those receiving unwanted requests were in the upper age range (10% of children aged 15-17 received such requests). A recent study in Ireland (Foody et al. 2021) among a sample of 848 adolescents aged 15-18 reported higher figures in terms of sexual image sharing among young people. The study found that 44.4% of the participants had frequently been asked to send a naked image of themselves (12.1% had been asked once), 16.9% had frequently sent a naked image of themselves (6.9% had sent an image once)

9 It is illegal to send and share sexual images of anyone under the age of 17 – even if a person under 17 sends an image of themselves, under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998.

and 22.1% had frequently received a sexually explicit image of someone else after having asked for it (8.2% had received an image once). The survey showed that girls were more likely to be asked to send a sexual image than boys (29.3% of the girls and 15.2% of the boys), while boys and girls reported being equally active when it comes to sending images (8 and 8.9%). Fifteen point two percent (15.2%) of the boys and 6.2% of the girls had frequently received a sexual image after having asked for it. The differences between this study and the NACOS survey could be attributable to the different timeframes investigated in the two survey studies. The Foody and colleagues study (2021) assessed young people's involvement in sexual-image sharing in their lifetime, whereas the NACOS survey assessed sexual-image sharing in the past year.

Research into consensual image-sharing practices among adolescents show how they are negotiated differently across genders and sexualities with different consequences for boys and girls. Receiving sexual images tends to be a positive experience for boys and research has shown how it will often be a way for them to affirm their masculinity and bond with their male peers (Casas et al., 2019; Harvey & Ringrose, 2016). However, research points to how girls, who are open about sending or receiving intimate sexual images might be branded as slutty (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Ravn et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2013).

Research shows that consensual image-sharing is more common among LGBTQ youth compared to heterosexual and cis-gendered youth (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Gámez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020). This might reflect the fact that LGBTQ youth tend to use social media more frequently than heterosexual and cis-gendered youth and highlight the ways in which social media can function as a safe space to avoid offline discrimination. Young gay and bisexual men in particular engage more in consensual sexting than their heterosexual counterparts (Bauermeister et al., 2014). Research also shows that LGB people are more accepting of consensual sexting as a part of the sexual and romantic lives (Hertlein et al., 2015).

Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Non-consensual taking and sharing of sexual images is a violation of sexual autonomy and researchers thus refer to this phenomenon as image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn et al., 2019) or image-based sexual harassment and abuse (Ringrose et al., 2021a).

Image-based sexual abuse refers to (a) taking or creating images[10] without consent, including voyeurism and 'upskirting' (taking images of an individual's pubic area underneath their clothing in public (McGlynn et al., 2017) and the creation of 'fake nude' images or 'fakeporn' (digitally altering a person's image to make it sexual or pornographic (Henry et al., 2018)), (b) sharing sexual images without consent (including hacking a device or account and sharing the person's private images), (c) threatening to take, create or share sexual images, including sexual extortion (often known as 'sextortion' which refers to the practice of coercing individuals (often children, young people and women) into creating and sharing intimate images using threats and force, including blackmail (McGlynn et al., 2019)), (d) unwanted sexual images, including cyberflashing (distributing unsolicited images – usually of a penis – via digital technologies such as Airdrop, social media platforms, dating platforms and video conferencing platforms, e.g., 'Zoom bombing') (Marcotte et al., 2020; McGlynn & Johnson, 2020; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2021a) and unsolicited 'dick pics' (the unsolicited digital distribution of penis images to an individual); (e) unwanted solicitation for sexual images, also referred to as pressured sexting (the often repeated requests for sexual images by peers – overwhelmingly requests by men and boys exerting pressure on girls (Kernsmith et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017).

10 Images encompasses all forms of visual content, e.g. photographs, videos, chats, live videos.

Prevalence of image-based sexual abuse

While there are no research studies published in Ireland on the prevalence of cyberflashing (sending unsolicited sexual images), according to a 2018 UK survey, 41% of women between 18-24 years old had experienced cyberflashing. While only a few of the targets report this to the authorities, the number of cyberflashing reports to the British Transport Police has increased from 3 in 2016 to 66 in 2019 (Bowden, 2020). An extensive study (Powell et al., 2020) across Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom in 2019 (52.1% women and 47.9% men) showed that 37.7% of 16-64-year-olds had experienced at least one of those forms of image-based sexual abuse: 33.2% had a sexual image taken of them without their consent, 20.9% had had a sexual image of them shared without their consent, and 18.7% had experienced threats to have their sexual image shared.

A recent study in Ireland (Foody et al. 2021) provides an insight into the prevalence of the solicitation of sexual images and the sending of unwanted sexual images among adolescents (15-18 year-olds). The survey showed that 52.5% of the participants had been asked to send a naked image of themselves. However, this study did not assess whether this solicitation had been unwanted and whether respondents felt pressured to send the image. In terms of receiving sexual images, 44% of the participants had received an unwanted sexual image and 29.5% reported that this happened frequently.

Research by the Department of Justice in April 2021 showed that 5% of all the respondents (1.000 nationally representative adults) had had an intimate image of themselves shared online without their consent; these figures were higher for respondents in their thirties (10% of people under the age of 37 were targeted by non-consensual sharing of their intimate images; Finn, 2021). This initial research shows the need to urgently tackle image-based sexual abuse in Ireland.

Gendered Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

There are significant gendered differences in the experiences of image-based sexual abuse, both in terms of prevalence, in terms of the type of abuse, and in terms of the impact on the wellbeing of the target.

Overall, women and girls are more likely than men and boys to be the targets of image-based sexual abuse. A recent study in Ireland (Foody et al., 2021) among 15-18 year-olds showed that girls are more likely to be asked to send a sexual image than boys (29.3% of the girls and 15.2% of the boys) while boys and girls report being equally active participants when it comes to sending images (8 and 8.9%). Girls were much more likely to receive an unsolicited sexual image than boys (21.9% vs. 7.5%). Furthermore, a 2021 UK study of 336 13-18-year-olds showed that 37% of the girls had received an unwanted sexual image and 32% had received an unwanted "dick pic"[11]. In comparison, 20% of the boys had received an unwanted sexual image and only 5% had received an unwanted "dick pic". While half of the recipients received images from youth senders (56.6%), 43.4% received images from adult senders where 90.6% of these were strangers. Unwanted sexual images are thus significantly more likely to be sent by either adult strangers or youth known to the targets.

Another aspect of image-based sexual abuse is the unwanted solicitation for sexual images – also known as pressurised sexting (Ringrose et al., 2021c). The 2021 UK survey revealed that 41% of the girls had been asked to send a sexual image compared to 17.5% of the boys. Furthermore, of those youth who had been asked to send a sexual image, 44% of the girls said they either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt pressured, while 45% of the boys disagreed or strongly disagreed to feeling any pressure and only 12% strongly agreed that they felt pressured. The researchers found that the pressure of pressurised sexting can work in two ways; while girls are pressured into sharing intimate images, the boys also feel pressured to receive sexual images from girls as these function as sexual capital, confirming boys' heterosexual masculinity as well as creating homosocial bonding among male peer groups (Ringrose et al., 2021a). Interestingly, a 2021 study conducted in Sweden among 14-15 year-old boys who experienced receiving unsolicited sexual images showed that heteronormativity and traditional notions of masculinity prevent boys from talking about the sharing of sexual images and from identifying these experiences as abusive (Hunehäll Berndtsson 2021).

11 While dick pics are the most common unwanted sexual image, other body parts can feature in sexual images, for example a naked torso.

Recent research from England has investigated the experiences of teenage girls receiving unsolicited 'dick pics'. This research explores the difference for girls aged 11-18 years between receiving images from unknown adults and boys in school who they know (Ringrose et al., 2021b). The researchers found a sexual double standard where girls were not able to leverage dick pics for status the way boys could use girls' nude images for social capital because girls tended to be shamed for being the recipients of dick pics. The researchers found that the transactional idea behind sending an unsolicited sexual image in order to get one in return, is founded in a cis-gendered and heteronormative masculinity in which heterosexuality is assumed and confirmed via the homosocial bonding of exchanging sexual images of girls.

While most of the research is focused on youth and adolescents, a large 2020 study across the UK, Australia and New Zealand surveyed 16-64-year-olds (n=6,109). This study found that younger adults (20-29) are more likely to be targets of image-based sexual abuse. Furthermore, sexual diverse groups (LGB+) were more likely than heterosexual respondents to have experienced some form of image-based sexual abuse (56.4% vs. 35.4%).

Impact on targets – impact on mental health and how this differs based on gender and sexuality

A long line of research has shown that girls are at greater risk than boys of having their sexual image shared without their consent (Johnson et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2012; Setty, 2019). Furthermore, research identifies a gendered sexual double standard with little to no consequence for boys but with girls often facing increased stigmatisation such as slut shaming and victim blaming when they have their images shared (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

Some women who have experienced having an image taken, shared or threatened to be shared without their consent have suffered severe mental health issues as a consequence (McGlynn et al., 2019). The threat alone to share intimate images has paralysing and in some cases, life-threatening consequences as targets report a feeling of living in constant fear, with a constant (and sometimes repeated) digital threat that significantly changes and disrupts their daily lives. Many of the women who experience image-based sexual abuse report it as part of a previous or ongoing intimate relationship. In these cases, the abuse is reported as part of a variety of different types of domestic abuse and coercive control (McGlynn et al., 2019).

Men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse. In the 2020 Australian report, 22.3% of the male respondents self-reported having either taken, shared or threatened to share an image as compared to 13.1% of the female respondents self-reporting to have perpetrated image-based sexual abuse[12] (Powell et al., 2020). This reflects other research where interviews with targets of image-based sexual abuse overwhelmingly mention male perpetrators and perpetrators assumed to be male (e.g. unwanted sexual images of male bodies) (Ringrose et al., 2021a).

The motives for perpetration of image-based sexual are relatively diverse, though the self-reported perpetrators in the 2020 Australian report primarily describe their motivations as 'for fun', 'to flirt', and 'to be sexy' (58.3%). Other motivations included wanting to 'impress friends', 'control the person in the image' and wanting to 'embarrass' or 'get back at the person' in the image (Powel, Scott Flynn Henry 2020). What is significant about this survey is that it indicates how there seems to be a tendency among perpetrators not to recognise image-based sexual abuse as harmful (describing motivations as e.g. 'fun' and 'flirt') which is in sharp contrast to the way targets of the abuse in the same survey report negative feelings as a consequence of the abuse (86.2%), negative health impacts (55.1%), reputational concerns (78.8%), and impacts on their relationships with others (55.7%). Interviews with 25 targets of image-based sexual abuse in the Australian study revealed that all but one of the perpetrators in the mentioned experiences of abuse were men. When asked why they thought the perpetrators had taken, shared or threatened to share a sexual image of them without their consent, they gave a range of different motives, including: control, attention seeking, jealousy, obsession, misogyny, lad culture, sexual gratification, a 'prank', distress, humiliation, entitlement, and to build up social capital. This broad range of motivations illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon and the problem with identifying one clear reason for perpetrating this type of abuse.

12 It's significant to note that such numbers might be lower when people self-report.

When it comes to experiences of receiving unwanted sexual images, research also shows a gendered difference. Eighty percent of the girls in the 2021 UK survey reported feeling 'disgusted' when they received an unwanted sexual image and they stated that they felt no interest or excitement when receiving an unwanted sexual image Ringrose et al., 2021a). Another study carried out in the US of 2.045 women of all sexual identities and 298 gay/bisexual men found that women of all sexual identities generally experienced negative feelings about receiving unwanted sexual images (feeling 'grossed out', 'disrespected', or 'violated') whereas gay and bisexual men overall responded positively to unwanted sexual images (feeling 'curious', 'aroused, and 'flattered') (Marcotte et al., 2020). While much research has been done into consensual sharing of intimate images among LGB people (Bauermeister et al., 2014; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Gámez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018; Hertlein et al., 2015; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020), very little research has been made into the experiences with image-based sexual abuse for sexual minorities. This is a significant gap in the knowledge and a crucial aspect to cover in future research.

International Initiatives to Tackle Image-Based Sexual Abuse

With the introduction of Coco's Law, Ireland currently has the most severe criminal sanctions for online abuse in the European Union (Pogatchnik, 2020). Researchers behind the recent reports, (mentioned above) on image-based sexual abuse in the UK, Australia and New Zealand point out the ways in which the laws in the respective countries are insufficient. What follows is an overview of how the laws in those countries – as well as other English-speaking countries such as the United States and Canada – encompass (or do not) the various aspects of image-based sexual abuse:

Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England[13] Wales and Scotland have all criminalised the sharing of sexual images without consent, however in England, Wales and New Zealand this behaviour is criminalised only if it can be proven that the perpetrator did so with the intention to cause distress. The United States have laws in place in most states that to some extent criminalise either the non-consensual creation or sharing of intimate images. These laws are quite varied across the different states. The creation of sexual images without consent is similarly illegal across these countries, however the law in England only criminalises the creation of sexual images of children – but not of grownups. Since 2016, 'upskirting' (taking an image up a person's skirt without their consent) has become illegal in England and Wales but only if the motivation is sexual gratification or to cause distress. Furthermore, only Scotland and some US states have criminalised the sending of unwanted sexual images while the unwanted solicitation for sexual images remains legal in all countries. The threat to share sexual images is only criminalised in Scotland and Australia. Any other forms of non-consensual creation of sexual images (such as 'fake 'nude' images and 'fake porn') are not covered by the law in any of the countries (Ringrose et al., 2021a).

Coco's Law does cover threats to share images and is thus more comprehensive than the laws in both the UK (with the exception of Scotland), New Zealand and the United States. However, Coco's Law only covers some aspects of image-based sexual abuse. The Act does not cover the creation of 'fake 'nude' images and 'fake porn', nor does it address the sending of unwanted sexual images and the unwanted solicitation for sexual images.

13 The laws differ across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, thus no general law applies across all of the UK.

Research-Based Recommendations

Increased support for targets of image-based sexual abuse

While legal initiatives are a significant way to tackle some aspects of image-based sexual abuse, the problem cannot be solved through these alone – education and prevention are crucial measures. Furthermore, research shows that many targets of image-based sexual abuse find restorative approaches outside of the criminal justice system equally important – such as recognition from perpetrators as well as society at large of the harmful impact of the abuse. What follows are recommendations for tackling these issues via education and prevention programmes based on existing research (Powell et al., 2020; Ringrose et al., 2021a) for tackling the issue.

1. **Establish a designated helpline.** As research shows that targets of image-based sexual abuse find it unclear what their rights are and where to seek help, a designated, funded helpline could provide advice on how to report as well as advise on designated mental health and trauma support services. Such a designated helpline exists in the UK: **https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/**.

2. **Secure specialist emotional support.** Some targets will need access to professional emotional and psychological support. Targets and support workers highlight the need for specialist services that understand image-based abuse. This could be implemented by securing better resources for new training of existing services such as e.g. Women's Aid and Rape Crisis.

Recommendations for schools

1. **Introduce a whole-school approach to tackling sexism and abuse.** As much of the image-based abuse is affected by structural sexism and discrimination (as discussed in the section on gendered experiences of image-based sexual abuse and documented in previous research; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2021a; 2021b; 2021c), it is essential that schools challenge all forms of sexism, abuse, harassment, and discriminatory behaviour. This means embedding an understanding of gender and power relations in all aspects of school activities such as school policies and curricula (Ringrose et al., 2021a). Simultaneously, enhancing young people's responsibility, and encouraging them to reflect upon the consequences of image sharing could contribute to the prevention of non-consensual sharing, while preventing young people from sending nude images of themselves when pressured (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020).

2. **Avoid victim blaming.** If a student reports having a sexual image shared without their consent, for example, the focus should be on the lack of consent and not on questioning the student on why they shared or took the image in the first place. If targets feel they risk being blamed or worry that reporting will make matters worse, they are less likely to seek help (McGlynn et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2021a).

3. **Train teachers and staff to identify and respond to image-based sexual abuse.** All staff, but especially those who teach Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) should be trained to identify image-based sexual abuse, how to respond to disclosures, which support services to recommend, how to report the cases in line with school procedures, and how to communicate this to parents and carers.

Recommendation for RSE and SPHE lessons

1. **Consent should be at the forefront of the SPHE education** – both when addressing image-based sexual abuse specifically, but also when addressing sexual relations in general. Research evidences that abstinence-only approaches to sexting do not work (Strohmaier et al., 2014) and that consensual sexting can be a positive way for youth (especially LGBT+ youth) to express their sexuality. Instead, young people should be taught how to make informed decisions about sexting and how to sext consensually (Ringrose et al., 2021a).

2. **Deliver RSE/SPHE in small groups by trained staff or external experts.** Research shows that young people need a safe and non-judgemental environment and need to feel comfortable with the teacher in order to speak and ask questions (Ringrose et al., 2021a). Furthermore, the same research reports that young people prefer informal discussions in smaller groups when discussing sensitive subjects.

3. **Focus on prevention.** The SPHE education should be focused on the prevention of sexual abuse, rather than teaching young people not to engage in sexting. As the overwhelming majority of perpetrators are boys, they should especially be taught to identify and challenge masculinity norms and unequal gender relations (Ringrose et al., 2021a). Young people should also be taught about their responsibility to prevent and intervene and reflect on their role as participants or bystanders.

4. **Teach young people about the intersectional and gendered nature of abuse.** RSE/SPHE education should employ an intersectional approach that enables students to reflect on how masculinity and femininity norms as well as homophobia and transphobia impact different students in different ways. The training of teachers should also employ intersectional approaches so they can identify vulnerabilities and harm for students from diverse backgrounds and provide the appropriate support.

5. **Teach students to identify and respond to image-based sexual abuse.** Research shows that young people lack both the language to understand and the knowledge to respond to abuse. By focusing on consent in the SPHE, they should be able to identify coercion, harassment etc. in general and the different types of image-based sexual abuse specifically. In addition to enabling young people to name the experiences they should also be given the tools to block, report, adjust privacy settings etc. as part of their digital skillset (Ringrose et al., 2021a).

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Support and Reporting Services

Childline **childline.ie/** Free helpline: 1800 666666 Free text: 50101	Childline offers free support and counselling over the phone, live chat or text.
Women's Aid **womensaid.ie/** Free helpline: 1800 341 900	Women's Aid offers a free 24h helpline for women having experienced abuse – including image-based sexual abuse.
Rape Crisis Ireland **rapecrisishelp.ie/** Helpline: 1800 778888	Rape Crisis Ireland offers support to victim/survivors of sexual violence via a 24 hour helpline and at Rape Crisis Centres across the country.
Hotline.ie **hotline.ie/contact-us/report**	Hotline.ie allows for people to report online illegal content – including intimate image abuse – via filling in an online form.
Webwise **www.webwise.ie/**	Webwise is the Internet Safety Awareness Centre which provides resources for young people, parents and teachers.
LGBT Helpline **lgbt.ie/** Helpline: 1890 929539	The LGBT helpline offers support and information for LGBT people as well as their family and friends
BeLonG To Youth Services **belongto.org/**	The BeLonG To Youth Services is a national organisation offering support to LGBTI+ young people in Ireland
Men's Development Network **mensnetwork.ie/**	The Men's Development Network works with men to tackle issues facing them. One major part of the network is stopping men's violence against women.

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