

# Written evidence submitted by Professor Helen Frowe and Dr Jonathan Parry

## Non-contact Sexual Offences Inquiry – Intimate Image Abuse

We are writing to highlight our research into intimate image abuse, which is a pressing issue and one highly relevant to the current Home Affairs Committee inquiry into non-contact sexual offences.

As the Committee has noted, recent high-profile cases of murder committed by men with criminal histories of indecent exposure and voyeurism make the case for taking non-contact sexual offences much more seriously. In a digital age, another significant such offence is the sharing of intimate images without consent – otherwise known as “revenge porn”.

Victims of revenge porn can suffer significant psychological distress and having their images shared without consent has a harmful impact on their personal and professional lives. Recent legislative developments which have attempted to tackle this wrong are welcome – for example, the introduction of several new offences in the Online Safety Act 2023 to target those who share, or threaten to share, intimate images without consent. However, they do not fully address the wrongs done to victims, nor do they consider the full range of perpetrators.

Anti-revenge porn campaigners have called for more to be done to remove content from online platforms, given the harm caused to victims by **people being able to view such images and videos**. We argue that this *consumption* – as distinct from the *sharing* – of revenge porn is a serious moral wrong which exacerbates the harm done to victims.

Our research identifies three ways in which revenge porn consumers wrong their victims:

1. Consumption *enables* those who create and share revenge porn to wrong their victims. These perpetrators aim to publicly humiliate the victim – but there is no sharing or public humiliation without an audience. Consumption is thus a form of participation in the crime of sharing intimate images.
2. The more people who look at the images, the *greater the harm and degradation* suffered by the victim. Humiliation is not the only factor to consider – revenge porn can lead to suicide, loss of employment, and fear of physical attack. All these harms are exacerbated by greater numbers of people viewing the images.
3. Consumption *sends and amplifies the message* that the victim is not worthy of respect. While some consumers may genuinely stumble across such images by accident, websites hosting this material typically advertise themselves as revenge porn sites – with some people paying to visit them. Consumers who intentionally access these sites maintain a community that endorses and celebrates the degradation of victims.

We believe the Committee is right to consider the crime of voyeurism and how perpetrators can spiral into committing more serious crimes. However, with the ubiquity of technology, we believe also that the consumption of revenge porn – a technologically mediated version of “in real life” voyeurism – **should be taken just as seriously**. The law regarding the possession of indecent images of children confirms that the mere consumption of certain abusive images can constitute a serious wrong. Whilst the content of revenge porn images might not be criminal, consuming illegally shared intimate images should, we believe, also be a criminal offence.

Those who consume – and, of course, share – intimate images without consent perpetuate a culture of degrading victims and compromising their sense of safety. We very much hope, therefore, that your Committee can consider this digital voyeurism as part of your inquiry, and the potential for it to escalate into more serious offences.

For a brief overview of our arguments for criminalising revenge porn consumption, see [here](#) and [here](#). These build on our published research, available [here](#).

March 2024