

Northern Ireland Lags in Support for Revenge Porn Victims

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Cara Hunter, a member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party in the Stormont Assembly, has slammed the lack of adequate support for victims of so-called revenge porn in Northern Ireland, describing the situation as wholly insufficient. Unlike the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland offers no publicly funded service to assist

victims in removing intimate images shared without consent, exposing a glaring gap in victim support.

Intimate image abuse, commonly known as revenge porn, involves the non-consensual sharing of sexual images, whether online or offline. The Department of Justice (DoJ) in Northern Ireland issued a statement acknowledging the growing problem, noting that the minister is keen to bolster services. However, no concrete action has been taken to fund a dedicated removal service, leaving victims to fend for themselves.

Hunter, who herself endured the distress of a deepfake pornographic video manipulated to feature her likeness, has called on the DoJ to fund a proactive service to locate and remove such content. She described the crime as “cruel,” designed to humiliate and shame victims. “I’ve met constituents who are utterly devastated by this,” Hunter said in a recent interview. “The absence of a funded service shows a lack of urgency in tackling this growing issue.”

In England, Wales, and Scotland, the Revenge Porn Helpline, funded by the Home Office and the Scottish Government, provides critical support. Sophie Mortimer, the helpline’s manager, explained in an interview with BBC News NI: “We use reverse image searches and facial recognition to identify content and work with platforms to remove it. Victims often feel ashamed, but we reassure them they’ve done nothing wrong; it’s the abuser who has betrayed their trust.” In the Republic of Ireland, Hotline.ie offers similar assistance. Yet Northern Ireland remains the outlier, with no equivalent service receiving government backing.

Victims in Northern Ireland face a gruelling process, forced to manually scour the internet using reverse image tools or trawl social media and websites themselves. They must file individual reports for each image on each platform, often with no guarantee of prompt removal. One victim, anonymised as Olivia, shared her ordeal with BBC News NI: “All I wanted was to know the images were gone. When the Public Prosecution Service decided not to prosecute, I felt dismissed. There’s no way to ensure those photos are deleted.” She also recounted a troubling interaction with a police officer who suggested she was at fault for sharing the images in the first place, adding, “There was no empathy.”

The Police Ombudsman was unable to substantiate Olivia’s claim of insensitive treatment, and the Public Prosecution Service stated that the evidence in her case was insufficient for prosecution. Such outcomes leave victims like Olivia feeling abandoned by the system.

The DoJ claims that Northern Ireland residents can access the Revenge Porn Helpline's services, and it is exploring options to formally extend the helpline's reach. However, the helpline itself has clarified that without funding, it must prioritise cases from England, Scotland, and Wales, leaving Northern Irish victims with limited recourse.

Hunter argues that the lack of funding is symptomatic of a broader issue. "Much of revenge porn is rooted in misogyny," she said. "We need to confront tech-facilitated abuse head-on." Intimate image abuse was criminalised in Northern Ireland in 2016, following England and Wales in 2015 and Scotland in 2017. Freedom of Information data obtained by the BBC shows 14 convictions in Northern Ireland in 2024 and 12 in 2023, with the PSNI investigating 91 cases in 2024 and 86 in 2023. Charities, however, insist the problem is far more widespread than these figures suggest.

The current Labour government in Westminster has yet to address this gap in Northern Ireland's victim support framework, despite the clear disparity with other UK regions. Without urgent action, victims are left to navigate a complex and emotionally draining process alone, underscoring the need for a funded, dedicated service to tackle this pernicious form of abuse.