

Northern Ireland Fails Victims of Revenge Porn, MLA Says

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Northern Ireland remains the only part of the United Kingdom without a dedicated publicly funded service specifically for the removal of intimate images shared without consent, leaving many victims without practical support or recourse. Critics say the failure to act reflects a troubling lack of urgency from authorities, while the problem grows increasingly widespread.

Cara Hunter, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) representing the Social Democratic and Labour Party, has strongly criticised the absence of resources to remove sexually explicit images shared without consent, often called revenge porn. While other parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland provide government-funded services to locate and erase these images, Northern Ireland has not followed suit. “This is such a cruel crime,” Hunter said, describing the emotional devastation suffered by victims forced to hunt down illegal content themselves.

The Department of Justice (DoJ) acknowledged that intimate image abuse is becoming more prevalent, stating that the minister is exploring options to improve services. But so far, nothing concrete has been put in place. One victim, speaking anonymously to BBC News Northern Ireland, described feeling abandoned after authorities declined to prosecute the perpetrator who had circulated her private photos. She recalled being told by a police officer that she was partly to blame for sharing images in the first place, a response she said reflected a complete lack of empathy.

Currently, the Revenge Porn Helpline, funded by the UK Home Office for England and Wales and by the Scottish Government for Scotland, offers assistance, including reverse image searches and contacting websites to remove content. However, this helpline prioritises cases in regions where it is formally funded. Hotline.ie serves victims in the Republic of Ireland, but no equivalent publicly financed program operates in Northern Ireland.

Without a dedicated service, victims are left to comb through websites and social media themselves, filing individual takedown requests with no guarantee of success. The process can be overwhelming and often re-traumatizes those already targeted by malicious acts.

Hunter, who herself was the target of a “deep fake” pornographic video digitally altered to look like her, has called on the DoJ to provide funding for a formal removal service. She emphasised that much of this abuse is rooted in misogyny and a culture that exploits technology to humiliate women.

Intimate image abuse was officially criminalised in England and Wales in 2015, in Northern Ireland in 2016, and in Scotland in 2017 under the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act. According to data obtained by the BBC under Freedom of Information laws, there were 14 convictions in Northern Ireland last year and 12 the year prior. But advocacy organisations argue the actual scale of the problem is far greater than reported figures suggest.

Despite clear evidence of harm, Northern Ireland's authorities have yet to match the level of support available elsewhere in the United Kingdom, leaving many victims with little more than apologies and vague assurances of future action.