



Image-Based Abuse and the Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Images

A Note on Language



In this toolkit, we will sometimes use the word woman/women and feminine pronouns for simplicity and to recognize the significant impact technology-facilitated violence has on women and girls. We recognize that TFGBV also impacts trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people. We hope that all people impacted by TFGBV will find these documents useful.

What Is the Non-Consensual Distribution of Images?

In Canada, the non-consensual distribution of images is the sharing of an intimate image, without your consent, when you expected the image to be kept private. An intimate image is one where a person is nude, exposing their breasts, genitals, or anal region, or is engaged in sexual activity. It can be any visual recording, including a photograph or video recording.

In the context of domestic violence, perpetrators will often share or threaten to share intimate photos or videos of women to manipulate, punish, or control them. Many of these videos or photos are posted and shared online to popular social media sites, pornography, or "revenge porn" websites.

When posted online, some intimate images include identifying information of the individual, such as their full name, address, phone number, and place of employment or school, which can create a significant risk of further abuse, stalking, and harassment by other perpetrators. Women have reported being contacted by strangers asking for lewd sexual favours or more photos after their pictures or videos and personal information were posted online.

Perpetrators may also send, or threaten to send, images directly to friends, family, and others in the community who know the victim via email or texting.

A perpetrator can come into possession of intimate photos or videos in various ways.

- They originally took the photo or video,
- They were sent the photo or video by the person in the video (a selfie).
- They stole the image (by accessing the person's phone, computer, or cloud account).
- They photoshopped another image to look like the person.

Impact on Women

The effects of this violence can be devastating, impacting every part of a woman's life and future. Many women are re-victimized in their school, workplace, or community; and some have attempted or committed suicide as a result. Unfortunately, a significant amount of victim blaming exists in some of these cases, with people suggesting that women should not have shared the images in the first place. Even when the images were obtained without consent or permission (e.g. secretly recording someone or recording a sexual assault), the woman's actions are often questioned. However, the focus should not be on her actions, but rather on the distribution of intimate images without consent by the perpetrator.

Terminology

The non-consensual distribution of images is often referred to as "revenge porn" or "cyber harassment." Other terms used for this form of violence include sexploitation or sextortion (i.e. when someone blackmails another person by threatening to reveal explicit images) and e-venge, referring to the electronic distribution aspect.

The currently preferred term is "non-consensual distribution of images." This terminology does not focus on the action of the woman (which can be victim-blaming) or the motivations of the person who shared the image (which is often not revenge), but instead focuses on the lack of consent by the victim in either the recording or distribution of the intimate images.

Further, images do not have to show nudity or genitals (which is often the criteria used to determine whether an image is considered pornographic) or be sexual in nature. The term intimate image also encompasses photos or videos that may be intimate based on the victim's cultural/social background but do not depict nudity or sex (e.g. sharing a photo of a woman without her hijab to cause shame and embarrassment or extort her).

What Can Women Do?

Document What's Happening

For many women, their first instincts are to get the images removed from the Internet immediately. Before you do that, consider if you want to document or capture any evidence so you have a record of what was posted and by whom. This will be important if you decide you want to report it – either to the police, a lawyer, or other reporting processes.

Here are some tips for documenting evidence:

- Capture the URL where the image was posted.
- If the URL doesn't include it, identify which website it was posted on.
- If the website shows who posted the image, also capture (by taking a screenshot or screen capture) the name of the person who posted it and any other profile information available about them.
- Try to capture the date/time the image was posted if possible and always record the date the evidence was collected.
- If there is any other related harassment, such as emails or texts, be sure to keep those as well.
- If the abusive person made any statements about posting your intimate image, record that in your [documentation log](#).

Report to the Website

Many major social media websites have a process to remove non-consensual intimate images. These companies have policies that forbid non-consensual intimate images on their sites and, once reported, will remove the images. This is why you want to capture the evidence first before you report it, as once it's removed you will not have evidence of where it was posted.

Some websites do not have a reporting process to take down non-consensual intimate images. If this is the case, read their community guidelines or content guidelines to see if they will remove certain content. Some websites have content guidelines around harassing, abusive, hateful, or harmful content. While they may not have a take-down reporting process, they may allow requests for content removal if you email them or contact them. Some websites will remove content if there is a copyright infringement. This can be helpful if the photo or video was taken by you.

Be wary of websites that require a lot of personal information from you or ask for payment to remove the image. While most websites will try to be helpful, some websites may further exploit what happened to you by requesting personally identifying information so they can post it alongside the intimate image or blackmail you for money to remove the content.

Remove Your Image from Search Engines

For some women, the biggest worry is that these images will come up if someone searches for them. You can submit a request to Google or Bing and ask that they remove the URL links with your image from search results. This way, when someone searches your name, it's not the first thing that comes up.

If the image has been shared without consent, see the [Cyber Civil Rights Initiative Guide](#) to getting content taken off the Internet.

Report the Abuse

One option is to report to the police. It is an offence according to the Canadian Criminal Code to distribute non-consensual images.

Seek Support from an Anti-Violence Program

If the intimate image-based violence is part of a pattern of domestic or sexual violence, seek support from an [anti-violence program](#) in your community. They can help you with other things that are happening, along with the image-based abuse.

Tech Safety Tips

Here are some tips that may be helpful:

- If your photos and videos are automatically uploaded to an online cloud service, check to make sure that those accounts are secure and that someone else doesn't know the password. It is always a good idea to make sure that all your online accounts are secure and that no one else but you knows the passwords.
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- Review the privacy settings of your social media accounts, so you know who sees what you share. You may want to review your friends and followers, and if there is anyone you don't want to see your information, you may unfriend them or remove them as a follower of your account.
- Put [passcodes](#) on your devices, particularly devices that have photos and videos of you.

- Consider creating a Google Alert for your name so that if anything is posted online with your name, you will get an alert. This will be best for someone with a name that isn't very common. Also make sure you'll be okay getting an alert, even if that means you'll know each time your intimate image has been re-posted. Some women find this helpful to do, while some women feel that this can be difficult.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is part of a continuum of violence that can be both online and in-person. If you or someone you know is experiencing TFGBV, you are not alone. You can use sheltersafe.ca to find a shelter/transition house near you to discuss options and create a [safety plan](#). You don't need to stay in a shelter to access free, confidential services and support.

Adapted for Canada with permission from NNEDV's Safety Net project, based on their resource Image Based Abuse.

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