Covering Image-Based Abuse

A guide for journalists, editors, and producers

PREPARED BY MYOWN IMAGE
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH C.A. GOLDBERG, PLLC

The way you tell the story matters.

The way journalists report on image-based abuse shapes how the public understands it, how policymakers respond, and how survivors are treated.

01 Call it what it is.

USE	AVOID
Image-based abuse	~~Revenge porn~~
Image-based sexual abuse	~~Sex scandal~~
Nonconsensual intimate imagery	~~Leaked nudes~~
Nonconsensual distribution of intimate images	~~Explicit images surfaced~~
Digitally forged intimate images	~~AI porn~~
Sextortion	~~Sexting scandal~~

“Revenge porn” implies that the survivor did something to provoke the abuse and that the material is pornography. Neither assumption is justified. Motivations can include humiliation, coercion, financial gain, sexual gratification, social status, and more.

When these terms appear in the formal name of a law or court case, quote them accurately. Otherwise, use language that identifies the abuse.

02 Understand consent.

Consent to sexual conduct is not consent to recording. Consent to recording is not consent to distribution.

Consent is specific to a particular act, person, and circumstance. Agreeing to be seen by one person doesn’t give anyone else permission to see your body. Agreeing to be recorded doesn’t give someone permission to share that recording. Consent in one context doesn’t transfer to another, and it can be withdrawn for future acts. We understand this in nearly every other sexual context. The same principle applies when a camera or screen is involved.

03 Understand why this is sexual abuse.

We tend to think of sexual abuse as something that requires physical contact. But sexual abuse is fundamentally about consent and sexual autonomy: the right to decide who gets sexual access to your body, under what circumstances, and for what purpose. When someone distributes an intimate image without consent, they make that decision for the person depicted. They give strangers access to someone's naked body without permission. We generally recognize taking control of another person's body for sexual gratification, humiliation, or power as sexual abuse. The fact that it happens through a screen doesn't change that. Calling it a privacy violation alone misses the nature of the harm.

> Privacy concerns who has access. Consent concerns who gets to decide.

04 Don’t assume an image was created consensually.

An image can appear consensual even when its creation involved coercion, deception, exploitation, or trafficking. Someone may have participated in sexual conduct, appeared on camera, or even shared an image themselves under circumstances you know nothing about. If a survivor tells you that an image was created or distributed without their consent, take that account seriously. You can verify relevant facts without requiring them to disclose a history of sexual abuse or justify why they were involved in the first place.

05 Make informed participation possible.

Before an interview, explain:

- What the story is about and how the survivor’s experience will be used.
- Where and when it is expected to appear, including video, audio, print, and social media.
- Whether the interview will be recorded and what the outlet’s ground rules mean.
- Whether the survivor will be identified and what confidentiality protections are possible.
- What editorial control the journalist retains, including whether the survivor can review quotations or factual details.

Be transparent about the angle. If you’re investigating a controversy, say so. If the story changes direction, communicate that when possible.

Ask about safety concerns before publishing identifying details. Being publicly identified once doesn’t mean someone wants every subsequent story to repeat their name or personal information.

06 Respect their boundaries.

No survivor owes the public their story. A survivor can decline an interview, refuse a question, or choose not to discuss certain details. None of those decisions should be treated as evidence that their account is less credible.

Don’t repeatedly contact someone who has declined. Avoid approaching children, relatives, employers, or other people in their lives for personal reactions without considering the potential consequences.

07 Don’t make survivors relive the abuse to tell the story.

Avoid asking survivors to repeatedly describe intimate details, recount traumatic moments, or explain why they trusted someone.

AVOID	ASK INSTEAD
Why did you take or send the pictures?	What do you wish people understood about what happened?
Why did you trust that person?	How has the abuse affected your life?
Do you regret what you did?	How did the institutions involved respond?
What did you learn from this?	What do you think needs to change?
Why didn’t you report it sooner?	

Give people time to answer. Allow breaks. Respect questions they decline to answer.

Don’t expect survivors to cry, become visibly distressed, or recount graphic details to establish the seriousness of what happened.

08 Understand the consequences.

Image-based sexual abuse can affect nearly every part of someone’s life, including their safety, relationships, employment, education, and mental health.

A national study of young adults found that those who experienced image-based sexual abuse before age 18 had approximately **twice the odds of attempting suicide** compared with their peers. Among gender-minority young people who experienced this abuse, the odds were approximately **three times higher**, even after researchers accounted for other forms of sexual abuse and childhood adversity.

These findings describe associations, not proof that the abuse caused every attempt. They are a reminder of how serious the consequences can be.

Survivors may already be dealing with years of harassment, shame, isolation, and fear that their images will resurface. An interview should not add unnecessarily to that burden.

Source: Mitchell and colleagues, research on image-based sexual abuse and mental health among young adult social media users, Child Abuse & Neglect (2025).

09 Don’t become another distribution channel.

In most stories about trauma, journalists describe what happened. With image-based abuse, reporting can lead people directly to the material.

Don’t publish intimate images, even blurred or cropped. Don’t name the websites hosting them, provide screenshots, or include details that would help readers find them.

Don’t search for, download, or circulate intimate imagery merely to satisfy curiosity or establish someone’s credibility. If examining evidence is genuinely necessary for an investigation, use appropriate legal, editorial, and security safeguards.

> Some readers will search for the images.
> Don’t give them directions.

For example, in December 2020, Pornhub removed approximately 80% of its videos overnight, more than 10 million, after suspending uploads from unverified users amid scrutiny over child sexual abuse material and nonconsensual intimate imagery.

That doesn’t mean all those videos were abusive. But it does show the extraordinary volume of content the platform had hosted without effective verification standards.

When journalists name these sites or give readers enough information to find them, they risk directing traffic to intimate imagery of countless other people who never consented to its distribution.

Source: Samantha Cole, “Pornhub Just Purged All Unverified Content From the Platform,” VICE/Motherboard, December 14, 2020.

10 Remember that the images can spread again.

A 2024 investigation by Canada’s Office of the Privacy Commissioner documented one person’s intimate imagery being reposted more than **700 times across approximately 80 websites**.

For survivors, publication may bring a new wave of searching, downloading, sharing, and harassment. The original distribution may have happened years earlier, but the consequences can begin again whenever the images find a new audience.

Before publishing a link, screenshot, website name, or identifying detail, consider whether it helps readers understand the story or simply makes the material easier to find.

Source: Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, Investigation into Aylo (formerly MindGeek), 2024.

11 Headlines travel further than stories.

A carefully reported article can still cause harm through a sensationalized headline, thumbnail, television teaser, or social media post.

Headlines and promotional materials often reach people who never read the full story. They can also become permanent search results associated with a survivor's name.

Avoid framing abuse as a sex scandal, an embarrassing revelation, or a spectacle.

Focus on the conduct, the absence of consent, and the consequences. Don't use sexualized photographs or language designed to provoke curiosity about the images.

Editors, producers, headline writers, and social media teams should follow the same standards as the reporter.

12 Remember that public figures are survivors, too.

Being a public figure doesn't make someone's intimate images public property.

A person's profession, political candidacy, public profile, or previous participation in sexual conduct doesn't eliminate their right to consent.

Public interest in someone's conduct or qualifications may justify reporting. It doesn't automatically justify publishing intimate imagery or directing audiences to it.

Apply the same standards of accuracy, consent, and care that you would use when covering sexual violence involving anyone else.

13 Think about what happens after publication.

Coverage can bring renewed harassment, threats, and attempts to locate intimate imagery.

When possible, let survivors know when a story is expected to publish or air. Review promotional materials for unnecessary identifying details and information that could lead readers to abusive content.

Have a process for promptly reviewing safety concerns and factual corrections.

Give readers somewhere to turn.

Your coverage may reach someone experiencing image-based sexual abuse. Include resources that can help them understand their options and find support.

Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI)
Image Abuse Helpline: 844-878-CCRI · cybercivilrights.org
Support, information, and referrals for people experiencing image-based abuse.

StopNCII.org
stopncii.org
Helps adults prevent the circulation of intimate imagery on participating platforms using digital fingerprints created on their own devices.

NCMEC Take It Down
takeitdown.ncmec.org
Helps prevent the online circulation of intimate imagery created when the person depicted was under 18.

RAINN
National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE · rainn.org
Confidential support and referrals for survivors of sexual violence.

Additional resources
myownimage.org/resources

If you are the one being asked to tell the story.

The rest of this guide is addressed to survivors of image-based sexual abuse who are deciding whether, when, and how to speak publicly.

14 The decision is yours alone.

If you're a survivor of image-based sexual abuse or any form of abuse, you may feel the need to share your story as a way to regain control. Whether you choose to share anonymously, go public to reclaim your name, or stay private, **your choice is valid and completely yours**. It is also perfectly valid to want to move on and never speak of it again. Every survivor has the right to decide what is best for them, and you alone have the right to make that decision for yourself.

We recommend consulting with your mental health team and attorneys to help you decide when, if, and how to tell your story. For mental health or legal referrals, email **info@myownimage.org**.

15 Formats for telling your story.

- Print or online written interview, where you are quoted — a book or article feature, profile, expert opinion.
- **Op-ed.** Typically you, as the writer, would pitch this to publications.
- **TV or digital video** interview.
- **Documentary** interview.
- **Podcast** interview.
- **Speaking engagement** — a talk, a panel.
- **Writing your own book.** In the US this usually means either working with an agent to sell the proposal to publishers, or self-publishing.

16 Things to keep in mind.

- Reclaiming control means having the power to share **your** story **when** and **how** you choose.
- If something you want to know isn't offered during the request, **ask**. Ask every question you need in order to decide confidently whether to take part. You can ask the interviewer to send their questions before recording.
- Interviews and quotes can be edited and used at the discretion of the journalist or producer, which means **someone else controls the final version**. That is why it matters to gather as much information as possible before agreeing.
- You can ask whether you will be able to **preview** the content before publication, though the request may not be honored.
- You have a **network** of survivors who can vet reporters and producers or give you feedback on an opportunity. We are here to support you.
- If you have an attorney or an ongoing legal case, **always speak with them before speaking to media**. Failing to do so could affect your case. On defamation or legal risk, only an attorney can give you accurate guidance.

17 Questions to ask when you are offered an opportunity.

- What is the **format of the interview**? In person, phone, video call?
- What is the **format of the publication**? Outlet, video, audio, print, online?
- What is the expected **publication date**? *Dates can slip, and stories are sometimes cancelled.*
- **Who** are the organizations and people involved?
- Can you give me a brief **summary** of the project?
- What is the **angle** or goal?
- Who is the target **audience**?
- Is there **specific legislation** being highlighted or targeted?
- What role do you see **my story** playing in it?
- Will there be **payment**? *In the US it is uncommon, and often considered unethical, for journalists to pay sources — but you may be compensated for speaking events, documentary appearances and similar.*
- Can I be **referred to publicly** by my full name, or by a pseudonym? Will you agree to that?
- Can I **review** the project, or my quotes, before publication? *This is not necessarily customary.*

18 Know the angle before you agree.

Every interview has a specific angle or focus. Each project has a central theme or objective, and it is crucial to know what it is before you take part. An angle might be raising awareness of the impact of image-based sexual abuse, covering a current event such as AI deepfakes, or highlighting upcoming legislation.

Know what is being asked of you. Does the interviewer want to focus on the details of your trauma, potentially sensationalizing it? Are they interested in your healing? Your advocacy work? Is the piece really about pending legislation?

Know who is involved. Which organizations or individuals are leading the project can tell you about potential agendas. Watch for coded language that may indicate exclusionary practices or bias — particularly against LGBTQ people, BIPOC communities, sex workers, and other marginalized groups.

19 Red flags to watch for.

- **Lack of transparency.** Vague information about the project, or evasive answers to your questions.
- **Pressure to participate.** Any attempt to rush or push you into deciding quickly.
- **Victim-blaming language.** Sample questions that imply blame or shame, or that question your actions or choices.
- **Unclear goals.** Uncertainty about the purpose, angle, or objectives of the project.

20 How to handle those red flags.

Before the interview. Ask every clarifying question you need in order to understand the project. If you need longer to decide, say so, and ask whether you can confirm by a specific date.

During the interview. If a question seems problematic or victim-blaming, answer calmly and assertively. For example:

> "I understand your question, but it could shift the blame onto the victim. The issue is that my consent was violated when I shared an image with someone I trusted to keep it private."

If the interviewer disregards your boundaries, you have the right to end the interview:

> "I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, but this interview is not proceeding as I expected. I would like to end it now."

21 If you are building a platform.

Building community with other survivors brings immense fulfillment, and the physical and emotional labor we put into the movement deserves both recognition and compensation.

As we build our platforms, we have the power to amplify the voices of those who are often overlooked or, conversely, to contribute to their silencing. While this work is deeply personal, driving change for all survivors sometimes requires us to step back and de-center ourselves.

Protect your privacy by making sure your personal contact information is not easily accessible online — consider using public data opt-outs. And while sharing your story publicly is empowering, it can attract trolls and detractors. Take breaks, steer clear of negative comments, and rely on a strong support system when things get hard.

Glossary

Adapted from the glossary in *Call It What It Is* by Susanna Gibson.

Image-based abuse (IBA)

The nonconsensual creation, alteration, distribution, threatened distribution, or other abusive use of intimate images.

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)

A term developed by legal scholars Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley to describe image-based abuse and emphasize its nature as a form of sexual abuse rather than simply an invasion of privacy. Also referred to as image-based sexual violence.

Nonconsensual intimate imagery (NCII)

Intimate images or videos created, altered, or shared without the depicted person's consent, including both authentic and digitally created or altered imagery.

Nonconsensual distribution of intimate images (NDII)

The disclosure or distribution of intimate images without the depicted person's consent.

Deepfake (aka digitally forged intimate image)

An intimate image of an identifiable person generated or substantially altered using artificial intelligence, machine learning, or other computer-generated means to falsely depict the person's appearance or conduct in a way that appears authentic.

Sextortion

Threatening to distribute an individual's real or synthetic intimate images without consent if the person does not comply with certain demands.

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)

Any visual depiction of the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a person under eighteen.

Consent

An affirmative, informed, voluntary, and ongoing choice made by a person with the legal capacity to make that choice. Consent must be specific to the act in question and can be withdrawn at any time. Consent to one act does not imply consent to another. Consent to creating or sharing an intimate image with one person does not constitute consent to its further distribution.

Sexual autonomy

A person's right to make decisions over their body, sexuality, and sexual experiences. It includes the ability to decide whether, when, how, and with whom sexual or intimate access is shared.

Consent-based framework

An approach to understanding image-based abuse that centers on consent rather than privacy. Under this framework, the harm arises from disregarding a person's sexual autonomy and control over intimate access to or depictions of their body.

Intimate privacy

A concept developed by legal scholar Danielle Citron describing the ability to control access to intimate aspects of our lives, including our bodies, health, gender, and relationships. Citron argues that intimate privacy should be recognized as a human and civil right.

Secondary victimization

Additional harm experienced as a result of how other people or institutions respond to the original abuse, rather than from the abuse itself. It can result from victim-blaming, insensitive treatment, repeated questioning, disbelief, or other responses from law enforcement, courts, health care providers, family, friends, or other institutions and individuals.

Sexual abuse

Sexual conduct or activity that occurs without a person's freely given consent, including contact and non-contact acts of a sexual nature. Sexual abuse can occur in person or through technology and does not require physical contact.

The complete glossary appears in Appendix A of *Call It What It Is*.

About this guide

Prepared by MyOwn Image in partnership with C.A. Goldberg, PLLC.

MyOwn Image is a nonprofit organization working to prevent technology-facilitated sexual violence through legislative reform, education, and efforts to change how society understands and responds to abuse.

C.A. Goldberg, PLLC represents survivors of sexual abuse, stalking, online harassment, and other forms of personal violation.

MYOWNIMAGE.ORG
INFO@MYOWNIMAGE.ORG

This guide is intended for educational purposes and does not constitute legal advice.