

The Evolution of Terminology In International Law: From “Revenge Porn” To “Technology-Facilitated Image-Based Violence”

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Abstract

This article investigates the evolution of legal terminology in international law concerning the unauthorized sharing of private intimate images. It critiques the term "revenge porn" as insufficient, arguing that it overlooks the diverse motivations behind such acts and minimizes the profound harm inflicted on victims. The study examines the transition toward more accurate frameworks, including "image-based abuse" and "technology-facilitated sexual violence." Specific attention is directed to emerging threats posed by artificial intelligence, particularly deepfakes, and the terminological provisions outlined in the UN Hanoi convention. The paper advocates for standardized terminology as essential for strengthening legal protections for victims.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, deepfakes, Hanoi convention 2025, international law, terminology, image-based abuse, technology-facilitated sexual violence, victim protection.

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1. Introduction

The increasing integration of digital technologies into daily interpersonal communication has given rise to novel manifestations of gender-based violence. Among these, the non-consensual dissemination of intimate imagery has emerged as a particularly pressing concern. This development poses a dual challenge for international and domestic legal systems not only must such conduct be criminalized, but an adequate conceptual language must also be developed to capture its full complexity. Of particular relevance are the emerging risks associated with artificial intelligence technologies and the terminological innovations introduced by the 2025 United Nations Hanoi convention on cybercrime.

This article traces the trajectory of terminological evolution, moving from the inherently flawed concept of “revenge porn” toward more nuanced and encompassing categories such as “image-based abuse” and “technology-facilitated sexual violence.” Significant attention is devoted to the novel challenges arising from AI-generated content, especially deepfakes, and to the conceptual approaches codified in the Hanoi convention on cybercrime, adopted under the auspices of the United Nations in 2025.

Critique of the term “revenge porn” and justification for the need to shift the paradigm.

The term “revenge porn,” widely used in public discourse and at the early stages of legal regulation, has

been justifiably criticized in academic literature. As Richard Wingfield notes, the term is conceptually flawed because it implicitly suggests a certain degree of complicity or consent on the part of the depicted person and also narrows the perpetrator's motivation exclusively to revenge.. However, empirical studies show that the motives may be different: obtaining financial gain, asserting status within "manosphere" communities, sexual gratification, control and coercion in relationships, or simply "entertainment."

As Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell emphasize in their seminal work, the euphemistic and narrow language of public discourse shapes the paradigmatic conceptualization of behavior, excluding related acts from consideration and leading both to victim blaming and the justification of the offender. Moreover, the term "revenge porn" fails to encompass situations in which images were obtained through hacking, created without the person's knowledge (E.g, covert recording in public spaces upskirting, creepshots), or when consent to create the material was never given in the first place.

Conceptualization of image-based abuse and technology-facilitated sexual violence.

The move away from the problematic term "revenge porn" toward more precise language has been significantly shaped by the work of Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell. Their concept of "technology-facilitated sexual violence" (TFSV) effectively consolidates various digitally-enabled harms. This includes behaviors such as online harassment, cyberstalking, the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, and leveraging digital communication to coerce someone into sexual activity.

At the same time, the term "image-based sexual abuse" (IBSA) has become established in academic discourse. As Anastasia Karagianni notes, this concept encompasses both consensual and non-consensual creation and distribution of audiovisual material with erotic content and requires an analysis of consent at two stages: during the creation of the material and its distribution. Claire McGlynn and Éalgán Rackley emphasize that the IBSA framework makes it possible to recognize the spectrum of harm caused by such actions, including violations of dignity, privacy, and personal autonomy.

A collective monograph edited by Gian Marco Caletti and Collis Summerer, *Criminalizing intimate image*

abuse a comparative perspective (2024), is of fundamental importance for understanding the evolution of terminology. In the introduction, the authors pose the question, "What's in a name? From 'Revenge porn' to intimate image abuse, analyzing the theoretical and practical limits of criminalization and emphasizing the need to take victims' needs into account. In the chapter devoted to the case law of the European court of human rights, the evolution of understanding digital violence as a violation of the right to privacy is also traced.

New challenges of artificial intelligence and terminological solutions in international law.

The main challenge lies in the absence of a unified global standard. The current landscape consists of numerous initiatives that often contradict one another. This creates a situation in which transnational corporations are forced to comply simultaneously with incompatible requirements from different jurisdictions. UN experts emphasize that such a multiplicity of approaches not only creates gaps in AI governance but also makes compliance with these fragmented systems practically impossible.

The development of generative AI and deepfake technologies raises new questions for the conceptual framework. As Suzie Dunn notes, while deepfakes were initially created using open source machine learning tools to superimpose the faces of celebrities onto pornographic videos, the technology has now reached such a level of sophistication that generated images are difficult to distinguish from real ones. At the same time, according to research by Sensity AI, this technology is used predominantly against women to create sexualized content and to delegitimize female journalists and politicians.

Wingfield draws attention to the role of deepfake technologies in creating "deep nudes" images manipulated to produce "non-consensual synthetic pornography".

This necessitates expanding legal definitions: whereas the concept of an "intimate image" previously implied the authenticity of the depiction, it must now also include fully synthesized images that "falsely represent a person in a sufficiently convincing manner."

An important step toward the international legal unification of terminology was the adoption of the Hanoi United Nations Convention on Cybercrime (October

2025). Article 16 of the Convention, for the first time at the universal level, recognizes the unlawful distribution of intimate images as a criminal offense. Although the analysis of the implementation of this provision is still forthcoming, the very fact of its inclusion in an international treaty demonstrates a consensus understanding of the need for clear terminological recognition of this act.

The findings reveal a significant conceptual evolution within international law and adjacent fields. Discarding the reductive and stigmatizing label "revenge porn," researchers and practitioners have adopted more nuanced frameworks, notably "image-based abuse" and "technology-facilitated sexual violence." These modern constructs effectively encompass the diverse intentions of perpetrators, the full range of harm inflicted, and the unique dynamics of digital spaces. However, the emergence of AI generated synthetic content introduces fresh complexities, underscoring the urgent need for globally aligned terminology a process now supported by the provisions of the 2025 Hanoi Convention.

The developing international legal landscape for artificial intelligence governance is marked not only by the emergence of novel terminology but also by the interplay of distinct legal traditions. The European approach embodies a structured, rule-based framework characterized by precise definitions of actors such as providers and deployers and a graded system of risk classification. In contrast, the U.S. model prioritizes adaptability, economic competitiveness, and pragmatic governance, while simultaneously advancing novel politico-legal concepts, including the notion of algorithmic "ideological neutrality." Meanwhile, the Council of Europe's framework Convention aims to establish a shared, human rights oriented foundation. Yet, its practical impact remains contingent upon states' commitment to enforcing its provisions, particularly given the wide latitude afforded by national security exemptions.

For international law, the key challenge remains finding a balance between the need for harmonization (to avoid a "patchwork" of regulations) and the preservation of state sovereignty in defining national priorities for AI development.

2. Conclusion

The evolution of terminology from "revenge porn" to "technology facilitated image-based violence" reflects

not merely a change in wording, but a qualitative shift in how international law understands the problem itself.

The term "revenge porn," which originated in the media space, proved conceptually unsound for several reasons. First, it emphasized the motive of revenge, which unjustifiably narrowed the range of protected interests and created a risk of blaming victims for allegedly provocative behavior. Second, its association with the pornography industry hindered recognition of the real harm caused by such acts.

The shift to the term "non-consensual distribution of intimate images" marked an important step forward. By centering on the absence of consent, it redirected the focus from the victim's behavior to the violation of fundamental rights the rights to privacy, dignity, and personal autonomy. This approach laid the foundation for the harmonization of national legislation.

Finally, the inclusion of the term "technology-facilitated image-based violence" in UN documents marked the recognition of this act as a form of gender-based violence. The CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No. 35 (2017) and UN General Assembly Resolution 79/152 (2024) confirmed that states are obligated to protect women from such violations, regardless of whether they occur online or offline.

Thus, the evolution of terminology represents a shift from a colloquial and stigmatizing term to one that is legally precise and grounded in human rights. This is not merely a linguistic change but a necessary condition for the effective protection of human rights in the digital age. The further development of international law in this area must take into account the emergence of new technologies, including deepfakes, which will require continued refinement of the conceptual framework.

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