



THE BIG PICTURE

Non-consensual pornography, or revenge porn, ruins lives. So why is it still legal in most states?

By Kendall Weisberg
for CIO Forum

Annmarie Chiarini was a victim of revenge porn before any laws challenged it. Chiarini's ex reached out to her to rekindle their relationship. She agreed, but things soon took a bad turn, so she decided to break it off. When she called him to end it, he threatened to sell a CD of nude pictures of Chiarini on eBay.

"I begged and pleaded for him not to do it," Chiarini says. "The last words he said to me were, 'I will destroy you,' and he hung up the phone."

Revenge porn is a pop-culture phrase for non-consensual pornography. Generally, it's when someone shares explicit pictures or videos, that a victim willingly took, without permission. In most Midwestern states, it's not a crime.

Illinois, however, is saving the Midwest's reputation. The state's former governor, Pat Quinn, signed a law, which goes into effect June 1 and makes it a felony to "non-consensually disseminate private sexual images."

Rep. Scott Drury, the driving force behind the bill, says the crime is turning victims into "unwilling porn stars." Along with the creation of the bill, he's educating those who blame victims because they originally consented to taking the photo or video—even if they never meant for them to be shared.

"The victim never consented to the distribution of the video," he says.

Chiarini now uses her experience to help other targets, 90 percent of whom are women. She's the Victim Services Director for the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, and she testified in support of laws against revenge porn in Maryland

and Washington D.C. And she knows firsthand what victim-blaming looks like.

"I've been told I got what I deserved," she says. "I've even received threats for speaking out."

Despite obstacles, Chiarini will continue to help victims whose lives are being affected.

"Victims are losing jobs, getting kicked out of school, being shunned by friends and family, being harassed, stalked," Chiarini says. "Women have been assaulted and have attempted or have committed suicide."

Illinois' law is a big step in the right direction though. The bill states that the perpetrator can be charged regardless of intent. The perpetrator can have many different objectives, such as to make money or to show off. But with this bill, it doesn't matter. Drury found that when prosecutors have to prove malicious intent, it's difficult to make a case.

"They're not thinking about anyone but themselves," Drury says. "But the victim has still been victimized in the situation."

In 34 states, there are no legal consequences for the person who commits the crime. Drury believes that making revenge porn a felony with a harsh punishment will mitigate the crime. Chiarini agrees that putting all the blame on the person who distributed the photos is important.

"When people are blaming the victims, they're putting culpability on the person whose pictures were distributed and published without their consent," she says. "They're not focusing on the behavior of the perpetrator. And that's the problem." *dm*

