

- Computer sex / Sex crimes

Tips to reduce the risk of cyber-flashing

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EVEN though it's 2023, there is still no current offence that has occurred when an individual cyber-flashes another online, but it was back in March last year the Government guaranteed to make cyber-flashing a criminal offence. Currently, there is only a criminal offence for indecent exposure that is face-to-face between two or more people. This is under Section 66 of the Sexual Offences Act, whereby a person is guilty of the offence, if they intentionally expose their genitalia in front of another or in front of a group, with an intent to alarm or distress the victim when committing the crime.

On the other hand, cyber-flashing is the newly coined term used to describe when a person sends an online photo exposing their genitalia through social media platforms like Facebook, texting apps such as WhatsApp and dating apps like Tinder.

Cyber-flashing can also occur through email, forums, Bluetoothing and airdropping available on iPhones. Currently, cyberflashing can only be prosecuted if it falls under the offence of voyeurism (gaining pleasure from watching others be sexually intimate) or under sex offence laws. However, there is no singular criminal offence for cyber-flashing and this article insists that there should be as, without punishment, perpetrators may progress to further threatening sexual offences like assault.

According to the Office of National Crime Statistics, there were 24,203 female victims of indecent exposure in face-to-face situations, in 2018. The following year, a recorded 6 per cent of

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people have been victims of indecent exposure in everyday situations. In comparison, research done by Professor Jessica Ringrose found that in 2020, 76 per cent of girls aged 12–18 (where the majority are classed as minors) had been sent unsolicited images from teenage boys or older men.

That demonstrates how most young girls under the age of 18 have been victims of online cyberflashing, compared to indecent exposure. This highlights how even before adulthood; most females are unfortunately already victims of sexual offences, with social media and the introduction of new technology. Cyber-flashing is less prosecuted due to the unfortunate benefit of anonymity for perpetrators, hiding behind a false alias or social media account to send unsolicited images. It is easy for anyone over the preferred age of 13 to set up an anonymous account to commit an online crime. Feasibly, the perpetrator could be anyone, male or female, of any age, coming from any background or relationship with another; perpetrators can vary. But the motives for indecent exposure and cyber-flashing remain the same, the criminal wants to harm or distress another individual for personal gratification. Under the current sentencing for indecent exposure, penalties and fines are given to the criminals, alongside community orders, possibly meaning they might repeat sexual offences as the charges are wrongfully lenient.

The maximum indecent exposure conviction is two years, but this is for the most severe repeat offenders. Fortunately, under the new Online Safety Bill, which protects minors from online exposure to harmful and upsetting content, cyberflashing can result in two years of prison time for anyone who is reported to tech companies or the police.

The new Online Safety Bill holds social media monopolies more accountable to prevent illegal and distressing content, being easily accessible to platform users. Social media companies under the bill will have to take immediate action when users report others.

Even though anyone can be a victim of cyber-flashing, there are tips you can do to limit the risk of becoming a victim of cyber-flashing.

The first important step should be checking if your profile is private and only accepting friend requests from people you know or have met in everyday situations. Another tip is turning the Bluetooth setting off in public settings, such as when using public transport, this completely stops an individual from receiving a photo in the first instance.

Finally and most importantly, if an individual does receive an unsolicited image, they should block and report the account, whether it's normalised by society or not, cyber-flashing is set to become a crime and it should be reported as soon as possible.