Workshop Report

The Evolving Nature of Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA): Addressing New Challenges in Research, Policy and Practice

Dr Emily Setty, University of Surrey
Jonny Hunt, University of Bedfordshire

Workshop summary: Aims and scope

Hosted on 11 February 2025 as part of the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) Workshop Series, this one-day event brought together 38 participants from academia, education, frontline services, law enforcement, the tech industry and policy sectors. Titled *The Evolving Nature of Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA): Addressing New Challenges in Research, Policy and Practice*, the workshop aimed to critically examine the rapidly changing landscape of IBSA, with particular focus on AI-generated content, sextortion and the emerging risks posed by synthetic media. The implications for preventing and responding to IBSA experienced by young people were explored during the workshop.

The event provided a unique space for cross-sector dialogue on prevention, legal reform, education, support services and technological responses. Participants engaged in presentations, Q&A sessions and a World Café discussion, culminating in the development of an interdisciplinary position paper advocating for holistic, collaborative and rights-based approaches to IBSA affecting young people.

Event themes

The workshop brought together diverse voices to explore the fast-evolving nature of IBSA and the complex intersections between technology, culture, education and the law. The presentations and discussions highlighted several interlinked themes that collectively underscored the urgent need for more collaborative, youth-centered responses.

1. Emerging forms of IBSA in a shifting digital landscape

One of the workshop's most pressing concerns was the speed at which new technologies—particularly AI-generated deepfakes and 'nudification' apps—are reshaping the landscape of abuse. IBSA is no longer limited to the malicious sharing of real images but now includes synthetic sexual content produced without a victim's consent or even their knowledge. Participants shared alarming examples of teenagers using consumer apps to create fake nudes of classmates, exposing the ease with which everyday images can be weaponised. This shift marks a critical change in the dynamics of harm, where the production of an intimate image is no longer necessary for abuse to occur.

Additionally, the rise in financially motivated sextortion—often targeting boys—was identified as a growing threat. Law enforcement speakers highlighted organised crime networks impersonating peers or romantic interests to manipulate adolescents into sharing images before extorting them. This trend challenges conventional assumptions about who is at risk

and underscores the need for inclusive, gender-responsive educational and safeguarding strategies.

2. Gaps in legal and policy frameworks

There was strong consensus that while legal reforms in the UK (such as the criminalisation of deepfake porn and removal of intent requirements for prosecution) are welcome, current frameworks still fall short. Several speakers noted the legal grey areas surrounding youth-produced sexual imagery, where the same laws meant to protect minors can paradoxically criminalise them.

Participants expressed concern that fear of prosecution deters young people from seeking help, particularly when well-meaning adults convey risk in a way that fuels shame. A clear call was made for legal protections that distinguish between normative adolescent behaviour and abusive or exploitative acts, and for more consistent police guidance on Outcome 21/22 approaches that avoid criminalising victims.

3. The shortcomings of education and 'Just Say No' messaging

Educators and youth practitioners at the workshop discussed the limits of abstinence-focused digital education, which often relies on prohibition and fear rather than harm reduction and empowerment. The current RSE curriculum was criticised for its emphasis on legality over consent, ethics or respectful communication. Several teachers reported that they feel unable to deviate from the 'official script' to engage students in meaningful dialogue about digital intimacy, peer pressure or what to do when things go wrong.

This narrow framing not only silences key conversations but risks alienating students and reinforcing stigma. Participants called for a more realistic, rights-based approach to education that recognises adolescent sexuality and image-sharing as part of growing up and focuses on equipping young people with the skills and values to navigate it safely.

4. The role of shame, gender norms and social attitudes

A recurring theme throughout the day was the role of shame in reinforcing the harm of IBSA. As one speaker put it, "without shame, the threat loses its power." Cultural stigma surrounding sexuality—particularly for girls—and societal double standards were described as the invisible architecture enabling perpetrators to exploit their victims. However, it was also noted that boys are increasingly affected, especially in sextortion cases, and that gendered assumptions in educational materials may leave them more vulnerable.

Participants also discussed how honour-based IBSA reflects culturally specific dynamics of control and reputational harm, which are not adequately addressed by current policy. The need for culturally sensitive approaches to safeguarding was clearly highlighted.

5. Towards restorative and ecological approaches

Finally, the workshop generated momentum around the need for restorative, not just punitive, responses to IBSA. A deficit model that frames young people only in terms of risk

fails to support learning, growth or accountability. Instead, restorative approaches that help young people understand harm, take responsibility and repair trust were seen as more effective and developmentally appropriate.

This theme extended to a broader call for an ecological model of prevention—one in which schools, law enforcement, tech companies, families and young people work together. Cross-sector collaboration, shared responsibility and open dialogue were repeatedly emphasised as foundational to long-term change.

Next steps – Outcomes

Main outcomes include:

- **Position paper publication**: A comprehensive position paper was developed based on workshop discussions. It sets out the current IBSA landscape, critiques existing frameworks and provides stakeholder-specific recommendations.

- **Policy engagement**: Plans are underway to disseminate the position paper to relevant policy audiences, including RSE curriculum developers, digital regulators and youth safeguarding bodies.

- **Ongoing collaboration**: The organisers are exploring future events, knowledge exchange between interested stakeholders and a multi-stakeholder funding bid for further research on this topic.

- **Academic dissemination**: Findings will also be developed into an academic publication focused on youth digital citizenship and image-based abuse.

- **Educational resources**: Feedback from the workshop will inform the development of new educational materials focused on ethical digital intimacy and practical harm reduction. The materials will be embedded into our Reimagining RSE project, which will draw directly from the workshop findings when addressing RSE on IBSA.

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- Sophie Hawkes (Royal Holloway University)

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Participant feedback – Selected quotes

"One of the best SID-related events I have attended in fifteen years of doing them. A far more evidence-led and critical tone, trying to get to grips with the complexities of IBSA."
— Professor Andy Phippen, Bournemouth University

"This workshop was the perfect way to celebrate Safer Internet Day 2025. The organisers brought together stakeholders from academia, policy, and practice, brilliantly."
— Dr Devina Sarwatay, City St. George's University of London

"Such an insightful workshop. On Meta's behalf, thanks for convening such an outstanding expert and timely discussion."
— David Miles, Meta

"It was really fascinating to understand the complexities of the discourses between guidance, policy, legal frameworks and how we navigate these in the best interest of survivors."
— Alice Riches, VAWG Partnership Officer, Surrey County Council

"The contributions made for rich conversation… I particularly liked the emphasis on working towards practical action points that have the potential to make meaningful change in the lives of victims and survivors."
— Sophie Mortimer, Revenge Porn Helpline

"Really interesting workshop allowing time to combine the theoretical insights from academics with the on-the-ground experience of professionals."
— Louisa Street, Keele University