



Deepfakes Are a Real Threat

We must ban the AI-generated pornography targeting real women and girls—before it's too late

DEEPFAKES ARRIVED IN OUR COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS around 2019, when bogus videos and audio of celebrities and public figures like Mark Zuckerberg, Nicolas Cage and Nancy Pelosi started to make the rounds on Facebook and TikTok. The first use of the word *deepfake* (a portmanteau of *deep learning* and *fake*) to describe this kind of content was on Reddit, where a moderator started a subreddit for sharing—no surprise—pornographic images altered with famous women's faces.

Somewhere around 15,000 deepfake videos were available on the internet in 2019; by August 2023, that number reached 95,820, according to Home Security Heroes, a group of online security experts and researchers. Pornography amounts to 98 percent of all deepfake videos online, and 99 percent of those depicted are women. From 2022 to 2023, deepfake sexual content skyrocketed by more than 450 percent. An analysis by *Wired* found that in the first nine months of last year, 113,000 videos were uploaded to the top 35 sites set up to host deepfake porn—an increase of 54 percent from the 73,000 videos from the year before.

When deepfake images of Taylor Swift created using artificial intelligence were shared across social media earlier this year, a national conversation was jump-started for a time. But the everyday victims of deepfakes and online sexual abuse can't fight back the way a superstar can.

That's why it's so important that we stay focused on this issue and work to dismantle a toxic online culture that causes serious harm to women and girls. There are even apps being sold to boys that facilitate the "nudification" of images of their female classmates, which are then shared on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat.

"The only effective solution," says actor and activist Ashley Judd, "is for governments to ban them at every stage of production and distribution, putting legal accountability on the companies that provide deepfake technology, the creators of deepfake content and everyone in between, including users who feel entitled to view with impunity such abusive imagery of bodies, violating our dignity and rights."

The Campaign to Ban Deepfakes is circulating an open letter calling on Western governments to pass laws that establish criminal penalties for anyone who knowingly creates or knowingly facilitates the spread of harmful deepfakes, including all child pornography, even if entirely AI-generated;

mandate that software developers and their distributors prevent their products from creating harmful deepfakes; and hold them liable if those measures are too easily foiled.

Practically every state has taken up AI-related legislation, with as many as 50 such bills being introduced per week during the height of the legislative season, according to Axios. States like Georgia, Hawaii, Texas and Virginia have passed laws that institute criminal penalties for non-consensual deepfake porn, and South Dakota passed a law that makes it illegal to produce, possess or distribute deepfake images depicting real minors or anyone "indistinguishable from an actual minor."

This past fall, a few weeks after Caroline Mullet, the 15-year-old daughter of a Washington state legislator, attended her first homecoming dance, she and her female classmates discovered that a young man at their school had used AI to "strip" some of the girls' photos and had shared them online. She told her father, state Sen. Mark Mullet (D), who became the coauthor of legislation to ban the sharing of sexually explicit AI-generated images of real minors.

"I hate the idea that I should have to worry about this happening again to any of my female friends, my sisters or even myself," Caroline testified at a hearing on the bill. The legislation passed with no opposition, and Gov. Jay Inslee (D) signed it into law this past March.

Incidents like the one at Caroline's school are spreading from coast to coast—and it will take strong, vigorously enforced laws to stop them.

That's why in May, NOW members and supporters went to Capitol Hill and met with lawmakers to support national reforms like the Preventing Deepfakes of Intimate Images Act. Proposed by Rep. Joe Morelle (D-N.Y.), the bill would crack down on creators of deepfake images through both criminal and financial repercussions. We also pushed for the passage of a bipartisan bill in the Senate—the DEFIANCE Act—which enhances a provision of the Violence Against Women Act to prevent and prosecute cybercrimes.

Deepfakes are clearly a growing threat. We must ban them before it's too late. ■

CHRISTIAN F. NUNES, MBA, MS, LCSW, is the president of the National Organization for Women.