Cyberspace and Child Abuse Images: A Feminist Perspective
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Affilia 2006 21: 365
DOI: 10.1177/0086109906292313

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://aff.sagepub.com/content/21/4/365
Cyberspace and Child Abuse Images

A Feminist Perspective

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This article approaches cyberspace as a socially constructed space in which gendered power relations are replicated and examines how cyberspace has been expropriated to escalate child sexual abuse and other sexual offenses. Making connections between different forms of abuse of women and children demonstrates that feminist perspectives provide an essential framework for understanding how new information and communication technologies are reinforcing attitudes that degrade and dehumanize women and children. Analyzing the relationship between gender and other oppressions challenges the hegemony of discourses that emphasize freedom and the democratizing potential of cyberspace and shows how cyberspace is a site for increased violence and exploitation of women and children.

Keywords: child abuse images; cyberspace; law enforcement and child protection

Debates about cyberspace and new information and communication technologies (personal computers, mobile phones, digital television, and portable digital assistants) have been dominated by popular discourses that privilege the potential for limitless, creative, free communication and interaction (Akdenis, 1997). Within such discourses, cyberspace is constructed as a bastion of freedom of expression and a democratizing force. The Internet, of course, brings new potential for communication, together with unparalleled access to knowledge, and can have an empowering function in relation to individuals, groups, and communities who may be disadvantaged and marginalized in other respects (Travers, 2000). In the United Kingdom, access to computer technology for e-learning is part of the social inclusion agenda, and there is an explicit political objective of eradicating the digital divide (Prime Minister’s Office, 2002). Many parents also regard information and communication technologies, including the Internet, as important for their children’s education.

At the same time, a murkier picture has emerged, in which this new and infinite space is being used in ways that perpetuate and escalate the abuse of children and women (Hughes, 2002). Entering cyberspace may be dangerous for children in a number of ways. Not only may they be stalked online by sexual offenders (Hughes, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000), but they may be exposed to sexualized images that are detrimental to their development (Bilson, 1998; Livingston, 2000). Countless children are the subject of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to make and transmit images through new technologies (Renold & Creighton, 2003). At the national and international levels, children who are the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse have already endured other forms of abuse or are living in adverse social and economic circumstances (Kelly, 2001; Warburton, 2001).

This article examines, from a UK perspective, how cyberspace has been expropriated to perpetrate child sexual abuse. Adopting a feminist standpoint to support a critical and
gendered understanding of new technologies (Hughes, 2003), it uses existing theory and knowledge that men perpetrate the majority of interpersonal violence against women and children as a framework for illustrating that the same gendered power relations and dynamics infuse cyberspace (Itzin, 2000). From a feminist, particularly a radical feminist, standpoint, the extent and commonness of violence by men establishes connections between different forms of sexual violence (rape, sexual exploitation, and sexual harassment) and conceptualizes a more general phenomenon of sexual violence that has been extended to gain an understanding of sexual violence against children (Itzin, 2000; Kelly, 1988) and is directly relevant to cyberspace. Men’s acts of sexual violence against women and children are viewed as manifest expressions of and fundamental to men exerting their power and control and as central to the subordination of women and children. Sexual aggression, online or off-line, is approached as embedded in everyday, rather than deviant, patriarchal and masculine practices, the impact of which may also be related to other aspects of oppression related to age, sexuality “race,” and class (Butterworth, 1996; Travers, 2000). There is also recognition that the social processes that support patriarchal and masculine practices frequently operate to underestimate the extent of violence, to collude with the denial of perpetrators, and to minimize the impact of violence on survivors.

The focus is on computer/Internet-based pornography, specifically on images of child abuse. The definition of these images comes from Article 2(c) of the “Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography,” which was added to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 2000 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, 2002):

any representation, by whatever means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child, the dominant characteristic of which is depiction for a sexual purpose.

The term *child abuse images* is used, rather than *child pornography*, to emphasize that such images are a record of the sexual abuse of a child (Kelly, Regan & Burton, 2000; Wyre, 2000).

**What is Cyberspace?**

Cyberspace is a virtual, vast area for communication that was established through the Internet, a complex web of connections that was created by and is accessed through a range of digital and electronic media. The *Internet* is the collective term for a number of electronic forms of communication that include still and moving images, audio transmission, electronic mail, chat rooms, bulletin boards, Web sites, databases, and newsgroups, some of which are live and in real time. The Web is a part of the Internet that links sites and allows for the rapid movement from one site to another. The network can also be used for peer-to-peer transfers, the downloading and uploading of files from the hard drives of a designated group of people, which is significant because a server is not involved and thus transmissions are untraceable (Hughes, 2002).

The difficulties in theoretically exploring a virtual space are profound and different from analyses of other more tangible spaces. As Arnaldo (2001, p. 55) stated:

No single entity administers it, nor is it located anywhere. It is timeless and spaceless. There is no single point at which all the information is stored or from which it is disseminated, and it is said that it would not be technically feasible for any one entity to control all of the information conveyed therein.
The boundaries of cyberspace are determined only by the capacity of the technologies, and as these technologies expand, so will the dimensions of cyberspace. No other form of communication is as global and cheap or so easily transcends regional and national barriers and cultural and ethnic barriers. The commonest form of access is through personal computers, although access is possible through other means, such as digital television and mobile phones.

It has been argued that these technologies create “new social spaces in which to meet and interact with one another” (Kollock & Smith, 1999, p. 4) and that the media shape forms of social interaction. Rather than stressing democratization, an opposing view emphasizes how cyberspace affects social organization and communities of interest to concentrate political power and to promote new forms of social exploitation and domination (Hughes, 2003). The imminent availability of third-generation technologies, portable multimedia that provide multiple points of access to cyberspace and increased difficulties in tracing, affords greater opportunities for criminal activity. According to D’Ovidio and James (2003, p. 1) “the Internet has become the ideal instrument for individuals who wish to intimidate, threaten and harass others.”

Child Sexual Abuse and New Technologies

Images of child sexual abuse on the Internet are part of the wider phenomenon of child sexual abuse. National and international research has repeatedly drawn attention to the scale and prevalence of child sexual abuse within and outside the family (Finkelhor, 1994; Grubin, 1998; Kelly, Wingfield, Burton, & Regan, 1995). Sexual abuse is distributed across social classes, geographic areas, and ethnic and cultural groups. Even in conservative estimates, the vast majority of perpetrators are men, and the majority of victims are girls and young women, although boys and young men are also affected (Durham, 2003; Finkelhor, 1994; Grubin, 1998; Interpol, 2002; Kelly et al., 1995).

Men who are prepared to abuse children in one way are also more likely to abuse them in other ways and to be abusive toward women. The relationship between different forms of violence against children and women—such as between domestic violence against women and the physical and sexual abuse of children (Hester, Kelly, & Radford, 1996; Ross, 1996; Saunders, 2001) and between the sexual abuse of children through prostitution and their abuse in pornography (Arnaldo, 2001; Barnardo’s, 1998; Svedin & Back, 1996)—has become more difficult to refute (Karlen & Hagner, 1996; Kelly & Regan, 2000a). Kelly and Regan (2000b, p. 6) emphasized that

whilst there are probably some individuals who limit their activity to collecting child pornography, in the majority of cases known to law enforcement agencies and non-governmental organisations, the production and use of child pornography is one practice within a repertoire of child sexual abuse.

The global interconnections between child sexual abuse, abuse of women and children, and other forms of oppression are also apparent. Greater vulnerability to sexual abuse is related to economic and social inequality and racism and is particularly evident in countries that are torn apart by civil war (Kelly & Regan, 2000a). Child sexual abuse requires organization, whatever the protestations of offenders to the contrary (Wyre, 2001), and may involve periods of targeting and grooming within which child abuse images may form a part of the process (Itzin, 2001). The levels of organization and financial investment that are required.
for systematic abuse and commercial exploitation indicate that those who are involved have the determination and the wherewithal to construct barriers to law enforcement, as well as to silence victims.

Evidence of the extent of abuse, its many related forms, the levels of organization involved, and its pervasiveness has overturned explanations of child sexual abuse that are based on ideas of individual or family pathology. Equally, the demonstration of the overlaps between forms of abuse confounds attempts to construct character-based typologies of offenders (Itzin, 2001). The uncomfortable probability is that sexual abuse is perpetrated by apparently normal men in normal families and in the organizations that are supposed to offer children care and protection (FBI, 2002; Kelly et al., 1995; Pringle, 1998). This premise is particularly convincing when the exponential growth in the use of pornography (including child abuse images) is considered. The number of men who access computer-based pornography indicates, as Itzin (2001) posited, that this is not a small, deviant minority. Given what is known about the perpetrators of child sexual abuse, it is not surprising that they are exploiting the characteristics of cyberspace—its vastness, anonymity, illusion, lack of effective control, and potential mass and international market. Cyberspace offers unparalleled opportunities for the deceit and secrecy on which child sexual abuse relies and unprecedented access to vulnerable children and adults in their own homes (Taylor, 1999).

The difficulty of accurately establishing the number of abuse images and the number of children who are abused has been acknowledged (Creighton, 2003). New information and communication technologies allow multiple images to be produced from one digital recording of abuse and the transfer of images from other media; the number of images involved gives little indication of the number of children who are abused or the timescale over which the abuse has occurred (Renold & Creighton, 2003). Recent major international law enforcement investigations, such as Operation Starburst (1995), Operation Cathedral (1998), Operation Candyman (2001), Operation Landmark (2001), Operation Twins (2002), and Operation Ore (2002), have involved as many as 19 countries, including the United States. These investigations have found that child pornography, like other child sexual abuse, is sustained by powerful interests. It has been argued that new technology has been harnessed to escalate existing forms of commercial and noncommercial abuse and exploitation (Hughes, 2000a) and that the number of children who are affected is increasing (Carr, 2004). The Internet is known to have generated an exponential increase in the volume of pornography (Carr, 2001; Interpol, 2002); child abuse images are estimated to form at least 50% of the downloaded images (Rimm, 1995), and there has been an increase in sexual exploitation of children (Hughes, 2000a, 2000b). There is some consensus that the volume of abuse images continues to increase (Renold & Creighton, 2003) and that children are being abused at a younger age (Taylor, 1999; Taylor, Quayle, & Holland, 2001). There are also concerns about the progressive escalation in the seriousness of the offenses that are being committed by individuals and groups of offenders because of the disinhibiting effect of their access to online child abuse images (Taylor et al., 2001). This means that a huge amount of serious, real, violent crime is being committed to produce and broadcast child abuse images (Interpol, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000).

Men have new ways of producing and distributing child abuse images (Taylor et al., 2001). Scanners can be used to upload and distribute old images in digital form, and the availability of web and digital cameras means that men who were previously collectors of child abuse images can now produce them with little fear of apprehension (Hughes, 2002). Producers of these images can more easily contact other offenders, using the Internet to create and reinforce a “paedophile community” (Taylor, 1999, p. 4) and encryption software
to impede detection and law enforcement (Carr, 2001; Denning & Baugh, 1999). There are strong links between Internet pornography and other kinds of exploitation (Gillespie 2000), including trafficking in women and children and the sexual abuse of children and young women through prostitution and so-called sex tourism (Hughes, 2000a, 2000b; Kelly & Regan, 2000a).

The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

Research on the impact of child sexual abuse on survivors has been unequivocal about the detrimental impact of abuse on their development and well-being and the potentially long-term effects of living with the consequences (Durham, 2003). The degree of harm that is sustained varies (Grubin, 1998; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993), depending on the complex relationship between individual and broader social factors, including the age of the child when the abuse began, the length of time over which the child has been abused, the relationship with the abuser, the degree of violence used, whether the child is believed, and the availability of therapeutic and support networks. It may include poorer physical or mental health and, at its most extreme, may result in posttraumatic stress disorder or a level of dissociation (Briere, 1992) and functional amnesia. Many adult survivors carry the scars of childhood sexual abuse (Wattam & Woodward, 1996). In the United Kingdom, they form a large proportion of adults with mental health problems and are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and self-harm (Cahill, Llewelyn, & Pearson, 1991; Palmer, Chaloner, & Oppenheimer, 1992; Ullman & Brecklin, 2002). For some survivors, sexual abuse influences every relationship, and one of its most profound impacts is to isolate survivors from others (Sanford, 1991). For the victims, the costs are incalculable and for some will prove fatal. Although children and young people show amazing resilience in the face of adverse and horrifying personal experiences and adopt a number of strategies for survival (Warburton, 2001), for the most vulnerable, the effects may be difficult to ameliorate.

Attention has been drawn to the wider social context within which child sexual abuse is embedded (Hall & Lloyd, 1989) to highlight abusers’ willingness to exploit the powerlessness of children that may be associated with the impact of oppression, like poverty and racism (Gallagher, 1998). This broader context also shapes reactions to abuse. One of the most difficult aspects of child sexual abuse for children, and a serious compounding factor in terms of its effects, is the disbelief that continues to be associated with it. This is an objective of men who perpetrate child sexual abuse and an inherent aspect of the targeting and grooming that they use, including online, to silence women and children (Wyre, 2000). Bribes, threats, and coercion are used to ensure compliance and secrecy. When apprehended, perpetrators characteristically deny and minimize the extent and effects of their offending. Their denial is reinforced by societies that cannot or will not face up to a form of violence that challenges so much of what is taken for granted about the nature of the relationships between men, women, and children (Kelly et al., 2000).

Knowledge of how offenders operate is directly relevant to child abuse images and the ways in which offenders are expropriating the technology and progressive potential of cyberspace. Not only is this serious child sexual abuse and often evidence of other serious crimes, but offenders may be involved in other forms of abuse of children and women (Carr, 2004). Evidence of the impact of involvement in pornography as a specific form of child abuse is less extensive, but is likely to be similar to the “impacts of all child sexual abuse” (Kelly et al., 1995, p. 50). The damaging effects that were described earlier may be
experienced by children who have been abused to make images, and they are likely to be more severe if the children have also endured other forms of abuse, which is more than likely to be the case.

An exacerbating factor for many child victims is knowledge that a record exists of their abuse and the trauma, powerlessness, and shame they have experienced (Kelly & Regan, 2000b; Livingston, 2000; Renold & Creighton, 2003). That images may be accessed in perpetuity in cyberspace repeats the children’s victimization (Healy, 1996) and may be used by perpetrators to threaten children and young people into silence and to manipulate their fears that they were responsible.

Relevance of the Pornography Debate

Research on the impact of pornography, specifically pornography that involves children, is also relevant. A contentious debate about pornography involving women has persisted for several decades. This debate has encompassed disparate views, even among feminist writers and theoreticians, about the impact of pornography and whether responses to pornography should be censorship and criminal justice measures. Those who are opposed to censorship have tended to be skeptical about what criminalization achieves and concerned about the breadth of the application of legal remedies (Rodgerson & Wilson, 1991; Strossen, 1996). Others have objected to the restriction of individual freedom and choice. In much of this discussion, there has been a tendency to divide child pornography from pornography that involves adults. Although they represent different theoretical and political positions, arguments against the criminalization of pornography involving adults may have failed to recognize the interconnections between different forms of violence and may have impeded efforts to develop robust criminal justice responses to the abuse of children.

Some feminist and profeminist writers have consequently argued that it is spurious to distinguish between adult and child pornography. They have drawn attention to the blurring of women and children that is often the objective of pornography, which is more pronounced with Internet pornography. Considerable evidence exists about the direct impact of pornography on users (Einsiedel, 1992; Minneapolis City Council, 1988; Wyre, 2000), and about its relationship with sexual violence against women and children (Cowburn & Pringle, 2000; Eldridge, 2000; Wyre, 2001; Wyre & Swift 1990). Those with extensive experience working with perpetrators have found that every aspect of sexual offending is closely related to pornography (Wyre, 2001). A high proportion of male offenders who have sexually abused adults or children have said they have used pornography as a precursor. Marshall (1989), for example, found that 86% of his sample of convicted rapists were regular users of pornography and that 57% said they had enacted the abusive acts that they had watched. The majority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse were found to have pornography in their possession when they were arrested (Bennett & Gates, 1991). In his earlier study of offenders in Kingston Penitentiary in Canada, Marshall (1988) reported that 77% of those who were convicted of sexual offenses against boys and 87% who were convicted of sexual offenses against girls admitted to being regular users of hard-core pornography. This association appears more marked in relation to young offenders, who tend to have greater exposure to pornography and at a younger age. Becker and Stein (1991) found that 89% of their sample said that they used sexually explicit material, and Ford and Linney (1995) noted that a much higher proportion of young sexual offenders than of young men with nonsexual offenses had accessed hard-core materials. The more serious the sexual aggression, the more significant
was the use of violent pornography (Bailey, 2000). McLaughlin’s (2000) U.S. study of 200 offenders found that whereas not all collectors of child abuse images went on to abuse children, 24% of the sample who attempted to meet children or were making images were dangerous and included violent and sadistic offenders.

The factors that are implicated in sexual offending may be complex (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000), and there is dissension about whether the relationship between child pornography and sexual offending is causal. The relationship is significant, however, because, as Itzin (2001, p. 39) concluded, “every form of child sexual abuse can, and does, involve both adult and child pornography.” Pornography is relevant as evidence of abuse and for the part it plays in “creating and reinforcing both sexual fantasy and power relations—including rape and child sexual abuse fantasies” (Wyre, 2001, p. 239)—which offenders have used to support distorted thinking about children (Bailey, 2000) and to “normalize” child sexual abuse (Kelly & Regan, 2000b; Malamuth et al., 2000).

The reinforcing of dehumanizing attitudes toward women and children (Hughes, 2000a) may also shape men’s expectations of women in everyday sexual relationships (Cowburn & Pringle, 2000; Marshall, 2000). That the Internet appears to have fueled an increase in more violent pornography is acutely worrying. As was indicated earlier, there are connections between different forms of violence against women and children. In this bigger picture, the contribution that pornography makes in reproducing values and attitudes exemplifies the social institutions and processes that sustain the relationship between masculinity, sexuality, and abuse (Kelly, 1992). In cyberspace, in the absence of limits on how violent, abusive, or degrading images are, greater opportunities to contact other offenders and easily accessible technologies have contributed to an escalation in offending. Saturation has a general desensitizing effect, and because young people are a large proportion of users, their opinions, attitudes toward sexuality, and relationships are likely to be affected. Internet pornography’s influence on the attitudes of young men, for whom this is becoming a major source of information about sexuality, is yet to be fully evaluated (Kelly et al., 1995).

Feminist debates about pornography are relevant to the dilemmas that are posed by new information technologies. They offer a critical challenge to discourses that reify freedom of expression and minimal interference. They demonstrate how difficult it is to differentiate “adult” from other content and how attempting to do so rests on a flawed premise that “adult” content is harmless.

**Policing Cyberspace**

Two interrelated dimensions maintain sexual exploitation and abuse as a global and lucrative criminal enterprise (Baxter, 1990). First, is the exploitation of women and children living in the most adverse social and economic circumstances, many of whom have already experienced domestic violence and child sexual abuse. Second, is the exploitation of individual legal systems and the discontinuities between legal jurisdictions. To make, reproduce, and distribute pornography or to abuse young women through prostitution requires skilful navigation through the weaknesses of individual jurisdictions to secure evasion from prosecution or a minimal sentence on conviction.

The characteristics of cyberspace raise acute problems for law enforcement, although the idea that the technology of the Internet makes it impervious to control is being replaced by a view that control is difficult, but not impossible (Penfold, 2001). The international legal infrastructure that is necessary to prevent the exploitation of cyberspace is still developing,
confronting, in Kelly and Regan’s (2000b, p. 16) words, a situation in which offenders’ “mastery of the possibilities of technology currently far exceeds that of policy makers and law enforcers.”

Globally, countries are tackling the extent of child sexual exploitation, including computer-based abuse, and the challenges for protection and law enforcement have led to a number of initiatives (Warburton, 2001), including world congresses against commercial sexual exploitation of children, held in Stockholm (1996) and Yokohama (2001). An Agenda for Action, proposed at the first congress, aimed at increasing collaboration and cooperation and at harmonizing legal responses, has now been adopted by 161 governments, including the United Kingdom and the United States, which have agreed to produce detailed national plans of action to reduce sexual exploitation. As was mentioned earlier, in May 2000, the United Nations added to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (to which the United States is not yet a signatory) the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, 2002). An Agenda for Action, proposed at the first congress, aimed at increasing collaboration and cooperation and at harmonizing legal responses, has now been adopted by 161 governments, including the United Kingdom and the United States, which have agreed to produce detailed national plans of action to reduce sexual exploitation. As was mentioned earlier, in May 2000, the United Nations added to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (to which the United States is not yet a signatory) the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, 2002). In Europe, the objectives of the first congress were supported by two Council of Europe recommendations—to raise awareness of and provide more effective measures for prevention, detection, and law enforcement in relation to sexual exploitation, abuse images, prostitution, and trafficking (Council of Europe, 2000, 2001b); a report of a Committee of Experts on sexual exploitation (Council of Europe, 2003); and two Council of Europe Framework Decisions—one about trafficking (2002/629/JHA) and one about the sexual exploitation of children (2004/68/JHA). The European Convention on Cyber Crime (Council of Europe, 2001a) also contains provisions related to child abuse images. The second world congress, in Yokohama in 2001, acknowledged areas of progress, but underlined the scale of the problem and the extent of change required to make protection a reality for the hundreds of thousands of children who are affected.

Kelly (2001) reviewed progress in Europe toward meeting the objectives of the first congress and concluded that the foregoing measures provided a basis for a co-ordinated response, but that development had been uneven. An inhibiting factor that she identified was “a tendency to separate sexual exploitation from areas to which it is inextricably connected—sexual abuse of children and child protection generally, violence against women and equalities work” (p. 5). At the second congress, attention was again drawn to how the sexual exploitation of children is embedded in a web of disadvantage and powerlessness. Children’s vulnerability to abuse was related to structural factors, such as poverty and discrimination that is due to young age, gender, racism, and being orphaned by conflict or HIV/AIDS (Van Bueren, 2001).

Like many other countries, the United Kingdom recognized the need to develop robust criminal justice responses to child sexual abuse and other sexual offenses before the advent of the Internet (Gregory & Lees, 1999; Grubin, 1998; Nazir & van Oudenhoven, 1998). In the 1990s, this recognition led to a number of developments in an attempt to deal with the risks that are posed by sexual offenders (including the national prison Sex Offender Treatment Programme, extended license periods for sexual offenders, registers of sex offenders, postrelease supervision and Sex Offender Orders, risk assessment and management of sex offenders, and Multi-Agency Public Protection Panels). As elsewhere, the effectiveness of these measures has been limited. The majority of child sexual abuse is never reported to a statutory agency (Gallagher, Hughes, & Parker, 1994; National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1996), and prosecution and conviction rates have generally remained so low (Grubin, 1998; NCH Action for Children, 1994) that it has been argued that many offenders have little fear of being apprehended (Gallagher, 1998).
The United Kingdom’s Agenda for Action is embodied in a National Plan for Safeguarding Children from Child Sexual Exploitation (Department for Education and Skills, 2002; Department of Health/Home Office, 2001), which co-ordinates law, policy, and practice to combat child sexual abuse. Legislation to ensure that computer-generated pornography is treated in the same way as other forms has been reinforced, and maximum sentences have been increased. The law enforcement issues posed by the Internet are included in a National Hi-Tech Crime Strategy, in which tackling pedophile activity is a core priority. Most recently in the United Kingdom, the Sexual Offences Act of 2003 has framed the law so that existing offenses include those that are committed online. It has established new offenses that are related to the commercial exploitation of children and online grooming and has strengthened sentencing (see http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/sexual-offences). These developments reflect those in the United States. Regional discussions have taken place in North America, and in the United States, work on an evolving National Plan of Action is being carried forward by major nongovernmental organizations. Under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Crimes Against Children Program and Innocent Images National Initiative and the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section are central to promoting law enforcement in relation to child exploitation and child abuse images (see http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/ceos/mission.html).

Law enforcement in this field requires enormous logistical and technical expertise of police forces and individual officers. When investigating child abuse images, officers are also investigating serious sexual and other violent offenses. An image may be the only information about the scene of the crime or about the victim of a serious crime. The tasks of identification and tracing are immensely complex; many victims may remain unidentified, and the majority may live outside the area of the investigating authority (Kelly & Regan, 2000b). Care has to be taken so that the methods that are adopted do not replicate abuse or place victims at a greater risk of harm (Gallagher, 1998). Although major operations, such as Operation Ore, have led to a substantial increase in prosecutions in the United Kingdom (from 549 in 2001 to 2,234 in 2003), these prosecutions represent only a fraction of those who commit offenses (Carr, 2004), and even this number has placed almost intolerable pressure on law enforcement and judicial agencies.

Despite an increase in successful prosecutions, it has been acknowledged that there has been a somewhat dichotomous response through which offenses involving child abuse images appear to become disconnected from the child abuse implications and the children who are abused to make the images. As with other offenses of child sexual abuse, perpetrators, particularly those who are charged with possession and distribution, often successfully minimize their offenses, and judges fail to recognize the risks and dangers. There is evidence in the United Kingdom, as Edwards (2000) argued, that “there are some judges who continue to assume that the ‘child pornographer’ is less dangerous than the ‘child abuser’” (p. 20).

Internet service providers (ISPs) responded by establishing, in 1996, the Internet Watch Foundation, funded through their voluntary contributions to combat child pornography (an equivalent in the United States is the Association of Sites Advocating Child Protection). ISPs on a UK, European, and international basis have established hot lines, through which users can report what they believe is illegal material, including child pornography. (In the United States, a cybertipline is administered by the Center for Missing and Exploited Children.) INHOPE (Internet Hotline Providers Europe) Association was established in 1999 to advise Internet users, promote the development of hotlines, and provide for good
co-operation and communication and the exchange of information. In 2001 the UK government established the Internet Task Force on Child Protection, involving representatives from the information technology (IT) industry and other stakeholders, including child welfare organizations. The aim of the task force is to improve Internet safety for children through good practice guidance and to improve investigation and legal remedies (Home Office, 2003). Across Europe and in the United Kingdom, as in other areas of child welfare, nongovernmental organizations (voluntary agencies) continue to make a major contribution to promoting child safety and well-being. Initiatives have been launched to promote safe use of the Internet (Home Office, 2003), and a number of Websites have been established for children, provided by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and funded by the European Union through the Cyberspace Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire.

Essential as these legal measures to deal with offenders and broader policy initiatives are, feminist research and research conducted by child welfare organizations about child sexual abuse suggests that they are insufficiently robust. The rapidity of technological change and the ability of offenders to harness its capacity to abuse children sexually, in particular, demonstrate that self-regulation by the industry, software filtering devices, awareness raising, and even an enhanced ability to arrest perpetrators are inadequate preventive measures that bear little relation to the extent and nature of child sexual abuse or to the audacity of the perpetrators (Nelson, 2000). Children cannot be responsible, and should not be expected to be, for protecting themselves on the Internet or elsewhere (MacLeod & Saraga, 1988).

**Cyberspace and Child Protection**

The potential scale of offenses and criminal investigations poses equally formidable problems for the child protection system and the social workers and their agencies that have to assess the likelihood of harm and the safety needs of the children who are involved, including children who are abused in images, difficult though they may be to identify, and in perpetrators’ families, workplaces, and wider social networks. As in other areas of violence and abuse, the majority of concerns that come to the attention of statutory child care agencies do not involve convicted offenders.

The legal framework for child protection inquiries in the United Kingdom is provided by primary legislation—the Children Act of 1989—and guidance—*Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department of Health, 1999). The latter mentioned child abuse images accessed through the Internet for the first time in child protection policy guidance. It recommends that when child abuse images have been accessed or placed on the Internet, the police should consider the possibility of active abuse of children and establish individuals’ access to children in the family or through employment. If there are particular concerns, then social workers may need to carry out a formal child protection inquiry (s.47, Children Act of 1989). This approach to child abuse images reflected the level of awareness and state of the technology at the time. Rapid change and greater knowledge now suggest that this approach is inadequate and does not fully encompass the extent and forms of the abuse that is involved and, consequently, limits the scope of inquiries and assessments. It does not explicitly state, for example, that child abuse images are records of abuse of children in need of protection, nor does it fully recognize the part that child abuse images may play in other forms of sexual abuse and exploitation (Kelly et al., 2000). The possession, distribu-
tion, and even production of abuse images, serious as these are, may not be the only offenses. They may be used to perpetrate other offenses and other forms of abuse.

There are other compounding factors. The system has long been incident driven, more able to respond to physical abuse than to alleged sexual abuse, and professional concern has been acute about men who are known to, but not in, the immediate family or who move on to other families. The nature of the evidence and difficulties in pursuing criminal justice mean that prosecution and conviction may be unlikely. For social work practitioners, undertaking child protection inquiries and assessments in relation to child sexual abuse generally has been shown to generate considerable uncertainty and anxiety. Work in the area is hampered by the current limited understanding of exactly what part is played by child abuse images in the cycle of child sexual abuse (Chase & Statham, 2005).

There are concerns that the discourses that are dominant within criminal justice also pervade child protection and that whereas social workers now receive more and better training in child protection, they may feel inadequately prepared in terms of their knowledge and experience (Quayle & Taylor, 2002). This is a new and challenging area for most social workers, who may lack confidence in their understanding of the issues and in how to respond to the needs of children who are directly and indirectly involved. It is as yet unclear whether social workers and other child welfare professionals are sufficiently aware of the risks that the Internet presents (Downey, 2002). Anecdotal evidence suggests that compared to other child protection concerns, accessing child abuse images is not always regarded as a serious issue and is sometimes allocated to social workers who are in training.

Despite these serious concerns, social work practice in the United Kingdom is gradually being informed by work with sex offenders to strengthen assessments and interventions (Calder, 2004; Quayle & Taylor, 2002), and some local authorities are developing their protocols specifically to address the needs of children who are sexually exploited, including those who are trafficked. The major nongovernmental child welfare agencies in the United Kingdom, such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo’s, and NCH Action for Children, continue to play a crucial role in driving research, policy, and practice developments. Much of this work builds on earlier feminist contributions to social work interventions in the field of child sexual abuse. In April 2006, the UK Home Office launched its multiagency Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (see http://www.ceop.gov.uk). This center provides a single point of contact for the police, the public, the IT industry, and child protection agencies; gives expert support and advice; and disseminates good practice guidance. It also manages the national database of child abuse images.

**Conclusion**

In challenging ahistorical protechnology arguments that identify access in principle to public cyberspaces with democratic tendencies, a feminist perspective can highlight the ways in which power relations are embedded and enforced (Travers, 2000). Despite incontrovertible knowledge of the scale and impact of child sexual abuse and its relationship with other forms of violence and abuse against women and children, it has proved difficult to breach the wall of silence that surrounds it. Although they have encountered resistance, feminists and survivors have brought to and kept in the public domain the issue of child sexual abuse. The vital contribution of feminist perspectives has been that they do not see various forms of violence as separate entities, but explore these forms within the more general
phenomenon of gendered sexual violence. They also recognize the broader social processes that mirror and reinforce the denial and minimization of offenses that otherwise challenge so much of what is assumed about the nature of relationships between women, men, and children.

Recent evidence about Internet child abuse images has revealed staggering levels of child sexual abuse, where few victims are able to report offenses and even fewer men who offend are successfully prosecuted. Virtual cyberspace means real violence and exploitation, permeating every aspect of their lives, for an increasing number of women and children who are violated to satisfy the commercial and noncommercial demand for degrading, violent, and sexually abusive content. The public arena of cyberspace, like the private arena of the family, is occupied by men as their domain and a space in which to inscribe patriarchal and masculine practices. It is not that new information and communication technologies lead to different forms of abuse of women and children, but, rather, that the space created by the technologies has been used to perpetrate abuse, to contact other offenders, and to prevent the identification of victims and the prosecution of offenders (Arnaldo, 2001).

Feminist theorizing about gender, power, and violence and the voices of survivors have been critical in breaking the silence about child sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women and children and in informing social work practice. Their contribution to understanding what goes on in cyberspace is the same: to light its hidden corners and to claim back some of its emancipatory potential.

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