Holly Jacobs had reached a point of desperation when, in 2012, she fired off the e-mail that would set so very many things in motion. Jacobs’ ex-boyfriend had posted nude images of her online that — in the truest sense of the word — had gone viral, spreading like an uncontainable infection across the scantily-clad parts of the Web. Intimate, private moments she had captured and shared with an ex were now picking away at her reputation every time someone Googled her. Even changing her name didn’t stop them from haunting her. Jacobs was in search of a remedy.

As recounted later in an essay, Jacobs discovered through online searching that what she experienced had a name, “revenge porn,” and that there were other people — most of them anonymous and most of them women — that were victims of it, too.

Aiming to exploit and embarrass, hackers or vengeful exes would post the X-rated images online, maybe tweeting them out, e-mailing them or uploading them to websites explicitly devoted to "nonconsensual nude photographs," the term advocates prefer. Most victims, like Jacobs, had been told — by police, lawyers, everyone — that posting unauthorized nudes online was simply not a crime. Like so many of the indignities women have endured throughout history, revenge porn victims were told that their struggle was one to be suffered in silence.
But Jacobs wanted to make revenge porn a crime, so she e-mailed Mary Anne Franks, a University of Miami law professor who was outspoken about how terrible the Internet was to women.

Franks, though, was skeptical. Posting someone else's nude photos without their consent may be despicable but it sits at the nexus of so many issues that have plagued women for eternity — the exploitation of our bodies, men’s ownership of them, shaming our sexuality.

“I didn’t know if any of those things could really be solved,” Franks told Fusion.

Some say women aren't welcome on the Internet; the posting of nonconsensual nude images, which disproportionately affects women, is one of the most extreme ways of making them feel uncomfortable there. How could one law tackle all of that? But Jacobs eventually talked her into it.

“Here was this flesh-and-blood victim, saying ‘this ruined my life,’” Franks said. “And I thought, ‘Why shouldn’t I try? Why shouldn’t we spend some time trying to change things.’”

Three years later, we are seeing the fruits of the efforts of Franks, Jacobs, and other (mostly women) anti-revenge porn activists. This month, Google announced that it would at long last remove non-consensual nude images from search results. This was a big deal. For women terrified of the thought of someone simply searching their name online, Google would now offer real, actionable relief.
The announcement was the latest in a string of major victories for advocates working to get revenge porn offline. Since February, Reddit, Facebook and Twitter have all banned nonconsensual nudes. Since 2013, 21 states have passed laws making it illegal. On July 23, California Congresswoman Jackie Speier plans to introduce a federal law to ban revenge porn nationally. Recently, comedian John Oliver devoted an episode of his influential weekly news show to garnering support for it.

But those victories did not come easily. It was a long, long road to getting revenge porn offline.

In 2000, the Italian researcher Sergio Messina identified an emerging genre he called “realcore pornography,” images of ex-girlfriends that first sprung up in Usenet’s forums in the 1990s.

By 2008, the porn aggregation site XTube claimed it was receiving as many as three complaints each week from women who said unauthorized photos of them had appeared on the site, posted by an enraged ex. That same year a University of Maryland law professor named Danielle Citron published a 66-page manifesto in the Boston Law Review that laid out the abuse that marginalized communities, including women, often face online. Among the most disturbing details was the story of a 19-year-old gamer whose head was pasted onto nude images by the hacktivist collective Anonymous and then posted online.

Fetish sites dedicated to “realcore” began popping up all over the web. One of the most notorious was "Is Anyone Up?," a site featuring nude images of people alongside links to their Facebook profiles that was run by a California man named Hunter Moore. In 2012, the television personality Charlotte Laws launched a public campaign against Moore after topless photos of her daughter showed up on the site. Soon after, Jacobs founded the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative and started the End Revenge Porn Campaign, joining forces with Franks, Laws, Citron and a small contingency of other women that had dedicated themselves to the issue.

But Jacobs, a Florida Ph.D. student, operated the site under a pseudonym, afraid to further tarnish her reputation and career. When she went public with her story a year later, she became the international face of revenge porn. Her story spread even further online than the nude images of her had.

“It was huge,” said Franks. “We had never seen that before. As a victim, the last thing you want to do is come out and say this happened to me. But she reached a point of desperation where she decided that the nuclear option was the only option.” (Jacobs herself could not comment for this story because of ongoing litigation related to the photos of her posted online.)
Still, revenge porn victims seldom found sympathy, from either the websites where their intimate images appeared, or the law.

“There used to be a period of time where I would talk about this issue and people would say, 'Stop being a baby, it's protected speech.'”

The CCRI had begun meeting with major tech companies, realizing that if Google, Twitter or Facebook would agree to take down revenge porn it would solve many of the problems revenge porn victims faced — and perhaps more quickly than the law could.

Franks remembers meeting with Google for the first time in 2013, arguing that taking down revenge porn was simply consistent with other company policies. Google already delisted private, sensitive information like social security numbers or signatures when it showed up online. Why weren’t sensitive private photographs intended only to be shared with only one person treated the same way?

The argument appeared to fall on deaf ears.

“It was very divided,” Franks said. “There were people in the room very concerned about this issue. There were other people who would say, ‘I’m sympathetic but there’s no way we can scale a response without having to respond to all kinds of other takedown requests.’ And then a third group didn’t care at all.”

(Google told Fusion it did not have comment beyond its post announcing the revenge porn ban this month.)

Across Silicon Valley, it was more of the same, said Franks. Time after time, women from the CCRI would meet with Silicon Valley companies and get effectively nowhere, maybe swaying a few people in the room but never company policy.

“No one wanted to commit to anything,” said Citron. “There used to be a period of time where I would talk about this issue and people would say, 'Stop being a baby, it’s protected speech.’”

And in the law, women still found little solace. When takedown requests to websites failed, women were forced to come up with creative legal strategies, like claiming copyright over the images. (As John Oliver pointed out in his show last week, this required women to send naked photos of themselves to the U.S. Copyright Office, a far from ideal solution.) Only three states had laws making revenge porn illegal. And when women complained to police about online abuse, often they were met with questions like, “What’s Twitter?”

Of course, this all makes sense through the lens of history. Crimes that disproportionately affect women often require decades of tragedy before they are recognized as criminal. Take domestic violence: until the 1970s, both judges and police officers still typically viewed a man beating his wife as a trivial offense. Cases rarely went to court; more often than not a police officer would show up at a scene and just tell a woman to calm down.
So when California Attorney General Kamala Harris decided to make revenge porn a key part of her platform, it was a turning point for the revenge porn opposition.

"Attorney General Harris sees this as the next front in the violence against women category of crime."
Streaming into her office were depressing tales of the lives that revenge porn victims lived. One committed suicide. Another woman’s Monster profile was linked to her unauthorized nudes. Yet another had a website with them e-mailed to her boss. Harris was horrified.

In December of 2013, her office announced the arrest of Kevin Christopher Bollaert, a San Diego resident who had created the websites "ugotposted.com" and "changemyreputation.com," sites where people could post nude images. Bollaert would then charge hundreds of dollars if the people in the photos wanted them taken down.

Bollaert wasn't the first to go down for running a revenge porn site, but his prosecution was the beginning of what Harris' office would turn into a major legal campaign.

"Attorney General Harris sees this as the next front in the violence against women category of crime," said Daniel Suvor, Harris' policy chief. "She sees it as the 21st century incarnation of domestic violence and assaults against women, now taken online."

Around the same time, California became only the second state to put a revenge porn law on the books, opening the door for Harris to make even more arrests. In the past two years, 23 other states have followed suit.

But it wasn’t until last fall, when an iCloud hack resulted in hundreds of celebrity nudes showing up online in what Reddit users deemed “The Fappening” that Silicon Valley seriously considered doing something about revenge porn. Celebrity sweetheart Jennifer Lawrence was among the most prominent of the hacks.

“The fact that this happened to Jennifer Lawrence made us uncomfortable because so many people adore and identify with her,” said Franks.

The 24-year-old Hunger Games star appeared on the cover of Vanity Fair, telling the magazine what it was like to have to call and tell her father that nude photos she had taken for her boyfriend had been passed around Reddit, Twitter, 4Chan and Tumblr.

“I can't even describe to anybody what it feels like to have my naked body shoot across the world like a news flash against my will," Lawrence said in Vanity Fair. "It just makes me feel like a piece of meat that’s being passed around for a profit."

On Reddit, r/thefappening quickly became the fastest growing non-default subreddit of all time. The Verge called Reddit a failed state, “run by warlords.” This happened just as Reddit was seeking a new round of funding. It’s no surprise, then, that a few months later, in
February, Reddit CEO Ellen Pao announced that Reddit would crack down on harassment and become the first tech company to officially ban non-consensual nudes. (It’s also no surprise that the first company to do so was helmed by a woman.)

“One of Reddit’s core values as a company is protection of individual’s privacy,” the company said in a statement to Fusion. “Since images are often accompanied by personal information, the economic and emotional costs can be enormous.”

At the same time, Twitter, a company that seemingly prizes free speech over everything else, was seeing users like Robin Williams’ daughter Zelda Williams leave the network en masse, citing the "cruel and unnecessary comments" on the network that went unpolicied. Twitter CEO Dick Costolo was forced to admit, in a memo to company employees sent out earlier this year, that the company “sucks at dealing with abuse.” A month after Reddit, Twitter announced that it, too, would take down 'nonconsensual intimate photos or videos.'

“I think 2014 was just a shockingly bad year for women on the Internet.” These companies may have done this because they saw the writing on the wall. Word had spread that a federal revenge porn law was in the works, meaning companies might eventually be forced to do something about it regardless. This way, at least, they could make their own rules. Facebook and Google’s revenge porn policies followed shortly behind Twitter’s.

Revenge porn, our society has been slow to admit, is just another form of domestic abuse.

“I think 2014 was just a shockingly bad year for women on the Internet,” said Erica Johnstone, an attorney who founded Without My Consent, which helps people whose nude photos are posted. “Companies had been prodded by us for years and then all of a sudden they had this mandate to do something about it.”

Harris’ office is now working with Silicon Valley to help develop a standard set of practices for websites and social networks to deal with this content. Just this past April, Bollaert, Harris' first revenge porn conviction, was sentenced to 18 years in prison. The next big step, said the attorney general’s policy chief Suvor, is educating law enforcement and the public to recognize that revenge porn is a real crime.

"There’s a culture change that’s needed, similar to how law enforcement has responded to domestic violence and public conceptions about sexual and gender-based violence have evolved over time," he said.

Johnstone said that she would also like to see Yahoo and Bing follow Google’s lead in removing revenge porn results from searches.

In the meantime, now when victims like Holly Jacobs come to Johnstone, she can actually offer them a remedy to their problem.
"I can exhale," she said. "It's going to be okay. You can get this stuff taken down— that has never been true before."