

**FACEBOOK REFUSES TO HALT SEX
TRAFFICKING BECAUSE TECH EXECUTIVES
ARE INVOLVED IN IT**

**She Was Lured into Sex
Slavery Through Facebook.
Now She Wants to Stop Mark
Zuckerberg From Making
Victims 'Invisible.'**

A shareholder activist group wants Facebook to take steps to protect children from sexual abuse before implementing end-to-end encryption.

by [David Gilbert](#)

Getty

When Sarah Widman was a teenager, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat were her outlet, a way of connecting with the world. Then, one day she accepted a friend request from a stranger on Facebook.

“I was so young, and I was flattered by seemingly undivided attention,” Widman said at a press conference last week. “At the time, I did not recognize this as grooming behavior. I willingly exchanged sexually explicit photos with him at his request, because at the time being accepted by him — by someone — was important to me.”

He convinced her to meet him in person, and when she did, he locked her in a motel room guarded by armed men. “I was sold into sex slavery,” Widman said.

She was drugged and plied with alcohol to stop her from asking questions or trying to escape, but she finally managed to contact a friend and she was rescued.

Widman is, as she sees it, one of the lucky ones. Now, she's part of a group that's trying to get Facebook to reverse its plans to encrypt its entire network, a move Widman believes will make things a whole lot easier for those peddling child abuse material and seeking their next abuse victim.

"We have to hold Facebook and its users accountable," Widman said. "Children are losing their innocence, and families are being torn apart. No one deserves to be a victim. No one deserves to feel less than, and no one deserves to have pornographic material plastered over social media."

Now a 22-year-old psychology student based in Boston, Widman is part of an activist shareholder group organized by Proxy Impact, which will table a resolution at Facebook's annual shareholder meeting Wednesday to call on the company to ditch its plans for end-to-end encryption.

Since Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced the plan last year, child abuse experts and law enforcement agencies have pressured him to reverse course. And even though one world-renowned expert says there are ways to identify this vile material and activity that would also maintain privacy, Facebook appears unwilling to change its plan.

"By adapting end-to-end encryption without first taking steps to stop child sexual abuse on its platforms, Facebook could effectively make invisible 70% of the child sexual abuse cases, an estimated 12 million instances that are currently being detected and reported," Michael Passoff, the CEO of Proxy Impact, said. "We believe that encryption should be delayed until Facebook finds a way to balance privacy and child protection."

The company couldn't give a concrete timeline for when Zuckerberg's "[privacy-focused vision for social networking](#)" would be rolled out. So far, only the WhatsApp messaging app is fully encrypted, while Messenger has a Secret Conversations feature that allows for encrypted chats.

But Facebook's plans to fully encrypt all platforms has grabbed the attention of governments and law enforcement, as well as shareholders.

'A privacy-focused vision'

When Zuckerberg announced his plan last year, he called it [“a privacy-focused vision for social networking”](#) and framed it as a victory for privacy advocates after years of criticism about Facebook’s [failure to protect its users’ information](#).

But many people who work to prevent the spread of child sexual exploitation material online knew that the plan, if executed, would be a boon for pedophiles the world over.

“When he announced his intention to introduce strong encryption to Messenger and Instagram, Mark Zuckerberg made two things clear,” John Carr, secretary of the UK Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety, said. “It was a decision taken for business reasons. And he said it would inevitably mean the [spread of child sexual abuse material] would no longer be visible to the company.”

Facebook is far and away the biggest online platform for child abuse material, or, as Carr put it, “Facebook is without question the 800-pound gorilla in the world of online child pornography.” And the growth of child abuse material online has exploded in step with the growth of Facebook.

“Ten years ago there were about 100,000 reports of child sexual abuse materials, but in 2019, there were nearly 17 million reports of child sexual abuse material online and of that almost 16 million or 94% came from Facebook,” Passoff said, citing data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), a U.S. nonprofit set up by Congress.

Facebook told VICE News that it “leads the industry in combating child abuse online,” using technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning, as well as using long-established partnerships with NGOs across the globe.

But the scale of the problem is just getting bigger and bigger. Between 2018 and 2019, the number of files — images, videos, and other material related to child sexual exploitation — reported to the NCMEC’s CyberTipline [jumped from 45 million to 69.1 million](#), an increase of over 50% in just 12 months.

Almost all of those reports came from files found on Facebook.

PhotoDNA

Most of the cases reported to the NCMEC are automatically generated by an image hashing technology called PhotoDNA, an independently developed piece of software which extracts a distinct signature from uploaded images and compares it against the signatures of known harmful or illegal content.

However, PhotoDNA doesn't work on encrypted systems, meaning that if Facebook goes ahead with its plans to encrypt its entire network of apps, it will put a large proportion of illicit activity linked to child sexual exploitation out of the reach of those tracking the spread of this material.

Facebook says it has updated its products recently, with features aimed at "building safety into private spaces." Just days ahead of the annual meeting, Facebook announced that younger Messenger users — those under 18 — will [be automatically alerted to suspicious activity by contacts](#) they don't know.

But one of the co-creators of PhotoDNA, Hany Farid, says Facebook is simply not doing enough, saying that there are multiple solutions available to Facebook that would continue to prevent child sexual abuse material from being shared freely on the platform while maintaining privacy.

"I have spoken with the folks at Facebook several times on this issue and they remain frustratingly stubborn and indifferent to the harm that they know that they are going to cause," Farid told VICE News. "I have proposed to them multiple, feasible solutions that will allow programs like PhotoDNA to exist within an end-to-end encrypted system."

In his announcement last year about encryption, Zuckerberg specifically mentioned the issue of child exploitation and pledged to work on new methods to track it “by detecting patterns of activity or through other means, even when we can't see the content of the messages, and we will continue to invest in this work.”

Facebook couldn't tell VICE News what these “other means” will be or when they will be announced, and did not respond to Farid's allegations.

The Department of Justice told VICE News that it is “concerned” about the move to end-to-end encryption, calling Facebook's decision a major public safety issue.

“We believe responsible corporations would better serve their customers and the public at large by carefully and transparently testing, evaluating, and reporting on consequences of such a transition prior to contemplating full-scale implementation,” said Marc Raimondi, a spokesperson for the DOJ.

Shareholder revolt

Proxy Impact told VICE News on the eve of the vote that they have secured the backing of two major investor advisory firms, Glass Lewis and ISS, and are hoping that major investors like Blackrock and Vanguard will also support the resolution.

But even with the backing of a large number of shareholders — which would represent around 45% of the vote in any other company — Proxy Impact's resolution has no chance of passing. Because of the way Zuckerberg has structured the voting rights at Facebook, virtually no motion can pass without his approval.

However, Facebook's encryption plan is also facing outside scrutiny. In Congress, members of the Judiciary Committee are working on legislation known as the Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies (or EARN IT) Act, which could potentially hold Facebook and other internet companies responsible for failing to adequately protect children's safety, and instead, putting them in harm's way.

The [Attorney General](#), [Deputy Attorney General](#), and the [director of the FBI](#) have all spoken at length publicly in the last year about these concerns. Last week, U.K. Home Secretary Priti Patel called on Facebook to "listen to its shareholders and enter detailed, technical discussions with us to identify solutions to ensure the public's safety."

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But for those on the frontline of protecting children online, and those who have seen first hand the dangers posed by Facebook, changing the company's mind is paramount.

"My personal story is one that shows just how dangerous Facebook can be to children, and why every parent and grandparent in America should be insisting that this company, take every possible step now, to shut down the abuse and exploitation of children," Widman said. "Until it takes these actions Facebook risks becoming a no-go-zone for children."