

# Meta-Rape

## Sexual Violence, Criminal Law and the Metaverse

Prof Clare McGlynn, Durham University

Dr Carlotta Rigotti, Leiden University

### Executive summary

As immersive technologies and haptic devices increasingly blur the boundaries between physical and virtual spaces, the metaverse is becoming embedded in everyday life. However, this new frontier also exposes users, particularly women and girls, to sexual violence in the form of non-consensual touching, image-based sexual abuse, and other emerging harms. These experiences are frequently trivialised and inadequately addressed under existing legal frameworks.

This policy brief introduces the concept of ‘meta-rape’ to better reflect the embodied and intense nature of sexual violence in virtual environments. It offers a new typology of sexual harassment and abuse in the metaverse and critically assesses the potential for criminal law to respond to these harms. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, current legal provisions may already cover certain instances of meta-rape, though reform is needed.

Read the research in full: (2025) *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/ggaf009>

### The Metaverse:

#### An emerging social space with real-world consequences

#### Scale and momentum

- Public attention surged after Facebook rebranded as Meta, followed by major investments by Microsoft, Apple, and others.
- Roblox alone reported 89 million daily users in 2024, reflecting mass engagement.
- Despite fluctuating media coverage, development continues, largely led by private corporations.

#### What is the metaverse?

- A computer-generated 3D environment where users interact in real time via avatars and haptic technologies.
- Often described as the “*embodied internet*”, it goes beyond gaming to include dating platforms and virtual classrooms.
- Core technologies: VR headsets, bodysuits, and motion sensors enable multisensory experiences.

#### Why it matters?

- Immersive technologies make virtual experiences *feel real*, both *physically* and *emotionally*.
- Users often identify with their avatars as *virtual extensions of the self*:
  - Phantom touch: physical sensations experienced via avatar interaction.
  - Proteus effect: avatar traits influence user behaviour and social interactions.

# Sexual violence in the metaverse: A persistent and evolving threat

## Historical roots, contemporary failures

- Sexual violence in virtual spaces is *not a new phenomenon*:
  - **1993**: Users in LambdaMOO reported coercive avatar-based sexual interactions.
  - **2007**: Belgian police investigated a case of ‘virtual rape’ in *Second Life*, predating immersive VR technologies.
- These early incidents resulted in *severe psychological distress*, highlighting the *real-world emotional harms* of virtual violations.

## Immersive technologies, intensified harms

- As virtual reality became more *embodied and sensory*, reports of abuse grew:
  - **2016**: Jordan Belamire reported being **groped in VR**, calling it a “frightening” and “violating” experience.
  - **2021**: Nina Patel described a ‘virtual gang rape’ in *Horizon Worlds*, involving multiple avatars and emotional trauma.
- Both incidents illustrate:
  - The **embodied, emotional nature** of abuse in immersive environments.
  - The **inadequacy of platform-level safeguards**, including safety zones and reporting tools.

## Prevalence and pattern recognition

- Survey and platform data support a pattern of widespread harm:
  - **2018**: Nearly **50% of women** in a VR study reported sexual harassment.
  - **2021**: A *VRChat* study found abusive incidents **every seven minutes**.
- These findings mirror broader patterns of online gender-based violence, particularly in gaming and social platforms.

## Intersectional harms

- Women, especially those with *feminised avatars*, are *disproportionately targeted*, as are children
- *Intersecting forms of discrimination* (e.g., racism, misogynoir) exacerbate harms, particularly for Black women and girls.
- Current research is limited, but existing evidence suggests the metaverse may **amplify** offline inequalities and **reproduce structural violence**.

# Why 'Meta-Rape' matters: Rethinking sexual violence in the metaverse

## Beyond 'virtual rape' - naming the harm accurately

The terms '*virtual rape*' or '*virtual sexual assault*' are frequently used to describe sexual violence in the metaverse. However, these terms risk reinforcing the **false notion** that such harms are somehow *less real* or less serious than those occurring offline.

We instead propose the term **Meta-Rape**:

- A **descriptive and conceptual tool** that better reflects the **immersive, embodied, and gendered** nature of sexual violence in metaverse spaces.
- A term that helps challenge the **epistemic injustice** faced by victims whose experiences are trivialised, ignored, or mischaracterised.

## A feminist naming tradition

Meta-rape is grounded in feminist efforts to name overlooked or emerging forms of violence—such as sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse

These naming practices have historically helped *recognise*, *legitimise*, and *respond* to harms that were previously ignored. Meta-rape follows this tradition, describing non-consensual sexual intrusions via avatars, and recognising their real-world emotional and psychological impacts.

## Policy significance of the term

Using meta-rape as a framing concept supports multiple policy objectives:

- Reframes the conduct as serious sexual violence, not mere misbehaviour.
- Unifies disparate acts (e.g., avatar groping, sexual threats, simulated ejaculation) under a single, recognisable label.
- Strengthens victim recognition and supports calls for legal and institutional reform.
- Counters perpetrator impunity based on the notion that 'it's just a game'.

Meta-rape is not proposed as a legal definition but as a conceptual umbrella—a tool to inform lawmaking, governance, and education, while embedding a gender-sensitive perspective into regulatory approaches.

# Meta-Rape as a continuum concept:

## A framework for understanding sexual violence in the metaverse

The concept of **meta-rape** is proposed as a *continuum concept* - a flexible and inclusive framework that captures the evolving, intersecting, and often overlapping forms of sexual violence in the metaverse. Drawing on Liz Kelly's foundational theory of the continuum of sexual violence, this framing challenges artificial hierarchies that separate 'serious' and 'less serious' abuses. It helps illuminate the shared dynamics underlying diverse experiences: gendered power, intrusion, coercion, and harm.

Meta-rape encompasses both clearly recognisable acts and new, technologically mediated intrusions that may not yet be fully captured in legal or social discourse. Recognising meta-rape as part of a broader continuum of sexual violence - online, offline and in hybrid spaces - supports the development of more coherent legal responses, victim support measures, and preventive strategies.

## Categorising meta-rape practices

To help structure legal and policy responses, we propose a **five-part categorisation** of meta-rape practices:

### 1. Sexual Assault

Direct contact between avatars, often experienced physically through haptic devices (e.g. groping), can generate acute emotional and physical distress. These acts resemble offline sexual assault and are perceived by many victims as equally harmful.

### 2. Sexual Harassment

Non-contact abuse, including verbal threats, stalking avatars, simulated ejaculation, and environmental harassment, is common in immersive spaces. These behaviours echo street harassment and cyber abuse, and can have serious psychological consequences.

### 3. Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Includes the non-consensual creation, sharing, or manipulation of intimate imagery—now extending to avatars. Future abuses may involve AI-generated sexual deepfakes or virtual pornography involving a user's likeness without consent.

### 4. Metaverse-Specific Abuses

Novel harms enabled by immersive technologies include:

- *Avatar cloning* and sexual use of a person-like AI avatar;
- *'Shadow presence'* - ghostlike stalking after being blocked;
- *'Passing through'* avatars, violating personal space;
- *Avatar hacking* - taking control of another's avatar to commit or suffer abuse.

### 5. Emerging and Future Abuses

Given the rapid pace of technological change, future forms of meta-rape are inevitable. Legal and policy frameworks must remain adaptive, intersectional, and alert to emerging harms.

# Challenging hierarchies of harm

We caution against framing meta-rape as either **less serious** than offline sexual violence, or **more serious** than other forms of online abuse.

Such hierarchies echo broader societal tendencies to privilege **visible, physical harm** over **psychological trauma**, despite the latter often being more enduring. Many forms of sexual violence—across physical, digital, and virtual spaces—are shaped by:

- **Victims' prior trauma**
- **Intersectional discrimination**
- **The cumulative nature of abuse**

Rather than ranking harms, we must recognise their **different modalities** and overlapping realities.

## A violation of sexual autonomy

Meta-rape should be **criminally relevant** as a violation of:

- **Sexual autonomy**, and
- **Bodily integrity**, even when no physical contact occurs.

The avatar, often experienced as an **extension of the self**, becomes a site of abuse. Non-consensual acts against it represent a **deep personal invasion**. While some victims experience physical responses—such as panic attacks—the harm lies in the **non-consensual nature of the act itself**: the *'sheer use'* of another.

## Experiential harms and structural impacts

The effects of meta-rape mirror those of offline assault including: shame, freezing responses, psychological trauma, as well as victim-blaming and social trivialization.

These experiences are phenomenologically real—what matters is how the violence is felt, not the medium through which it occurs.

At a societal level, the consequences are far-reaching:

- Women and other marginalised users may withdraw from metaverse platforms or adopt defensive behaviours (e.g., gender-neutral avatars).
- This leads to gendered censorship, a reduction in diverse participation in shaping emerging technologies

## Policy implications

Telling victims to *'just log off'* trivialises their harm and ignores the **structural inequalities** reproduced in virtual spaces. **Legal, institutional, and platform responses** must recognise meta-rape as:

- A serious and gendered form of violence
- Embedded within broader dynamics of **digital and physical abuse**
- A threat to equality, safety, and freedom of expression in future technological ecosystems

# Criminalising Meta-Rape

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## Why criminalise meta-rape?

- The serious, embodied harms it inflicts - emotional, psychological, and social.
- The expressive power of criminal law - to name, condemn, and prevent these harms.

## Victims of meta-rape often face hermeneutical injustice:

- Their experiences are not recognised as real harm because our current social policies and criminal laws fail to recognise and understand this form of abuse.
- Legal vocabulary fails to adequately describe violations in the metaverse.

## Value of criminalisation:

- Provides expressive empowerment - a public acknowledgement that such acts are wrong and injurious, helping victims find language, recognition, and in some cases, a sense of justice.
  - Plays a norm-shaping role. Naming meta-rape as a criminal wrong signals societal condemnation, counters the normalisation of misogyny in digital spaces, and contributes to long-term cultural and behavioural change.
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## A caution on anti-carceral critiques:

Some feminist critiques, particularly from **anti-carceral perspectives**, warn against reliance on criminal law to address gender-based violence, citing risks of state overreach and institutional co-optation.

While these concerns are valid, **excluding criminal law entirely** risks:

- Silencing victims of new forms of harm and failing to provide them with the redress some seek and
- Reinforcing outdated legal frameworks that recognise only traditional, physical violence.

We argue not for a punitive-first approach, but for a **balanced, multi-pronged response**. Criminal law must operate **alongside** robust platform governance, civil remedies, public education and victim support services.

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## Applying existing criminal laws: Legal possibilities and limits

Current English criminal laws on sexual assault and harassment could apply to certain forms of meta-rape.

- **Sexual assault:** The Sexual Offences Act 2003 could apply where avatar-to-avatar contact triggers haptic sensations, arguably constituting "touching" through "anything else". If the conduct is sexual in nature (e.g., groping), it could meet statutory requirements. However, without judicial willingness and prosecutorial determination, this remains unlikely.
- **Sexual harassment:** The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 could apply to repeated behaviours such as stalking, verbal abuse, or "shadow presence". But again, the primary barrier is *not the text of the law*, but the prevailing societal minimisation of virtual abuse.

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## Addressing the gaps: Towards new legal solutions and a law on intimate intrusions

We propose a **general offence of intimate intrusion**, grounded in the protection of **sexual autonomy and integrity** across all contexts—offline, online, and immersive.

Such a law would:

- Reflect the full *continuum* of sexual violence, including physical, online, and meta experiences;
- Be *technology-agnostic* and future-proof;
- Enshrine a victim-centred understanding of harm;
- Provide clear expressive recognition of wrongful acts.

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## Read the Research in Full

This policy brief is based on the following research which is free to access and download:

Clare McGlynn and Carlotta Rigotti, *From Virtual Rape to Meta-rape: Sexual Violence, Criminal Law and the Metaverse* (2025) *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/ggaf009>

## Further reading and references free to access and download

Clare McGlynn, *Towards a New Criminal Offence of Intimate Intrusions*. (2024) 32 *Feminist Legal Studies* 189–212 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-024-09547-y>

Rigotti C, McGlynn C, Benning F. *Image-Based Sexual Abuse and EU Law: A Critical Analysis*. (2024) 25(9) *German Law Journal*. 1472-1493 [doi:10.1017/glj.2024.49](https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2024.49)

## About the Authors



**Prof. Clare McGlynn** is a Professor of Law at Durham University, UK and an expert on violence against women and girls. Her pioneering research on image-based sexual abuse has influenced new criminal laws in many countries around the world, and she regularly advises parliaments, governments, civil society and internet platforms. She is a member of the Council of Europe's [Committee of Experts on Combating Technology-Facilitated Violence against Women and Girls](#) and co-author of books *Image-Based Sexual Abuse: a study on the causes and consequences of non-consensual sexual imagery* (2021) and *Cyberflashing: recognising harms, reforming laws* (2021). [www.ClareMcGlynn.com](http://www.ClareMcGlynn.com) [ORCID](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Instagram](#) [Clare.McGlynn@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Clare.McGlynn@durham.ac.uk)



**Dr. Carlotta Rigotti** is a post-doctoral researcher at eLaw – Center for Law and Digital Technologies at Leiden University, where her work explores the intersections of law, gender, and technology. Her research focuses on issues such as image-based sexual abuse and diversity bias in AI systems, building on a PhD on sex robotics regulation at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. While publishing in peer-reviewed journals and teaching future generations, Carlotta engages in collaborations that bridge legal scholarship and practice, especially with CSOs and international organisations. [ORCID](#) [LinkedIn](#) [c.rigotti@law.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:c.rigotti@law.leidenuniv.nl)

22 August 2025