

Sexual violence in the metaverse has real-world impact on victims

Female-presenting avatars are far more likely to experience sexual violence, and victims' responses mirror reactions to sexual offences in the physical world.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, USA, April 30, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In the immersive digital realm of the metaverse, female-presenting avatars are far more likely to be subjected to sexual abuse and violence. Perpetrated primarily by male counterparts, this includes simulated sexual harassment, groping, sexual assault, and other violations.

Experiencing these acts in the metaverse can be deeply distressing for victims, with emotional and psychological responses resembling reactions to incidents that happen in the physical world. But despite the growing prevalence, private sector platform providers and governments are failing to adequately safeguard women and girls in the virtual world.



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These are some of the key findings in a new report, [Sexual Violence and Harassment in the Metaverse: A New Manifestation of Gender-Based Harms](#), co-produced by the Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRI), Equality Now, and VULNERA. After examining how existing criminal laws can be applied and adapted to govern the metaverse, the research concludes that new national and international legislation and policies are urgently needed to address this specific form of technology-facilitated sexual violence and

harassment.

METaverse USERS LEFT UNPROTECTED

It is often left up to users to find ways to protect themselves from harm in the metaverse, and the current approach to governance may prioritize a profitable business model focused on acquiring and retaining users, rather than ensuring that the fundamental rights of users are upheld and promoted.

While some private sector metaverse providers have rolled out mitigation measures, the research has identified a tendency towards victim-blaming and a failure to recognize and address the root causes of gender-based harm, which can have real-world consequences for victims targeted online.

Carlotta Rigotti, report co-author and a postdoctoral fellow at Leiden

University, explains: "There is a tendency towards trivialization and victim-blaming, where victims are often questioned about their behavior and safety settings. One could expect victims to withdraw from the metaverse in response to the abuse experienced, potentially impacting the diversity of this new virtual society."

The report underscores the need for international laws to be introduced that require all States to enact national laws and mechanisms that place obligations on technology companies to ensure they promote and protect human rights on their platforms and via their user policies and community standards.

WHAT IS THE METaverse?

The metaverse encompasses a vast interlinking network of virtual worlds where people use an avatar - a digital representation, typically in the form of a character or image - to interact with one another and their digital surroundings in computer-generated environments.

These virtual environments are crafted to feel convincingly real, providing seamless access to an



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unlimited number of users in real time. Users can transition between virtual worlds without encountering notable disruptions, maintaining a consistent and immersive experience.

By simulating realistic interactions and environments, the metaverse evokes emotions and reactions akin to those experienced in the physical world, enhancing users' sense of connection and engagement. Constantly advancing technologies such as immersive three-dimensional virtual or augmented reality technologies are further eroding the distinction between a user's physical and virtual experience.

Users can engage in a wide range of activities in the metaverse, such as working, socializing, gaming, attending events, shopping, and creating content. Until recently, the metaverse was predominantly accessed through online gaming, with players interacting through avatars, or as an extension of online social networks.

Other industries such as dating apps are increasingly venturing into virtual and augmented realities, enabling 3D rendezvous. This is being viewed as a way to encourage connections on deeper levels through the avatar creation process, which can be detached from people's physical appearance and stereotypes such as those relating to gender.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SAFETY IN THE METAVERSE?

The metaverse is predominantly under private ownership, with access to this virtual space in the hands of the creators and owners of websites and apps. This concentration of ownership means that metaverse governance is concentrated amongst a small number of major companies and the private sector.

Amanda Manyame, Digital Rights Advisor at Equality Now, explains that while companies have an important role to play in making sure all users can safely access and benefit from the opportunities presented in the metaverse, international and national regulation and cooperation at the international level must guarantee and ensure enforceability of the rights and freedoms of all who access this virtual space.

"The responsibility of safeguarding women in the metaverse is a charge that must be led by the State, with indispensable support from international legal frameworks. It is essential that we compel technology companies to adhere to human rights standards through legal mechanisms at both the national and international levels."

PRIORITIZING ACCESS AND SAFETY FOR ALL METAVERSE USERS

To help promote gender equality and mitigate risks from the outset, the report makes recommendations aimed at the developers of metaverse tools, including incorporating human rights impact assessments in design processes. The report also recommends the promotion of digital literacy as a fundamental right and prerequisite to ensure women's equal participation as

both developers and users in the metaverse.

Emma Gibson, coordinator for AUDRi, expands on the importance of safety and cooperative measures to ensure equal access to a shared digital future.

“In the virtual world where the future of human interaction is being reimagined, it's imperative that we prioritize the safety and dignity of all users. The responsibility of protecting women in the metaverse demands a collaborative effort, bridging states, international law, and technology companies to foster an environment where human rights are non-negotiable.”

“Women and girls need to be empowered to navigate and actively shape digital environments. Initiatives aimed at fostering a safer virtual environment need to be well developed, implemented, and accessed.

“The aim is not just to combat gender-based violence but to preemptively design a metaverse that embeds women's safety and rights at its core.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

To accompany Sexual Violence and Harassment in the Metaverse: A New Manifestation of Gender-Based Harms, co-authors Carlotta Rigotta and Gianclaudio Malgieri from Vulnera, and Amanda Manyame from Equality Now, led a webinar discussing the findings and recommendations from the report. The [webinar is available to watch here](#).

ABOUT: Alliance for Universal Digital Rights (AUDRi) exists to explore ways of creating a digital future in which everyone can enjoy equal rights to safety, freedom, and dignity – whoever they are and wherever, whenever, and however they exist and connect in the digital world.

Co-founded by Equality Now and Women Leading in AI, AUDRi focuses on women, girls, and other people from discriminated-against groups, all of whom face intersecting forms of discrimination and gender-based stereotypes in the physical world. Because it is only when the most vulnerable in society are protected that everyone is safe.

For more information, including on how to get involved in AUDRi, go to www.audri.org, and follow on X (Twitter) @AUDRights and on LinkedIn at AUDRi

ABOUT: Equality Now is an international non-governmental human rights organization that works to protect and promote the rights of all women and girls around the world by combining grassroots activism with international, regional, and national legal advocacy.

Our international network of lawyers, activists, and supporters achieve legal and systemic change by holding governments responsible for enacting and enforcing laws and policies that end legal inequality, sex trafficking, online sexual exploitation, sexual violence, and harmful

practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage.

For more information about Equality Now go to www.equalitynow.org, and follow on X (Twitter) at @equalitynow and LinkedIn at equality-now.

ABOUT: VULNERA is a research dissemination and networking platform focusing on the multifaceted connotations that the notion of human 'vulnerability' may assume in the data protection and privacy domains. It was established by the Brussels Privacy Hub and Future of Privacy Forum Europe.

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