
NOT JUST A GAME: “THE REALITY OF VIRTUAL RAPE”

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ABSTRACT

Rape, whether physical or virtual, stands among the most heinous violations of human dignity and human rights across the globe. Each day, countless women, children, and even men fall victim to brutal acts of sexual violence. While the world has started acknowledging the horror of physical rape, virtual rape remains a largely misunderstood and overlooked crime. Acts such as non-consensual sharing of explicit content, deepfake pornography, online sexual harassment, and immersive sexual abuse in virtual spaces are growing rapidly. These forms of assault may not leave physical scars, but they inflict deep psychological wounds, leaving victims isolated and often without any legal remedy.

In a time when society worships women as goddesses on one hand, and allows their bodies and identities to be violated “online” and “offline” on the other, the contradiction is heartbreaking. Although legal provisions exist to address physical rape, the same urgency and clarity are missing in dealing with virtual sexual crimes. Laws remain outdated, enforcement is weak, and awareness is minimal. This article sheds light on the rising threat of virtual rape, the psychological trauma it causes, the failure of current legal systems to offer protection, and the urgent need to redefine consent, safety, and justice in the digital age.

Keywords: virtual rape, online sexual violence, digital trauma, deepfake abuse, consent in cyberspace, gender-based cybercrime, legal reform, India, human rights.

INTRODUCTION

Gaming has evolved into one of today's most dominant trends, serving as a digital hub where millions connect through shared adventures, competitive spirit, and social interaction. For countless players, it represents an opportunity to build careers, find entertainment, and form meaningful connections. Yet beneath this vibrant surface lurks a disturbing reality. As gaming communities grow, so too do the darker elements that infest them. While most engage positively, others weaponize these platforms for harassment, exploitation, and increasingly, a new form of digital sexual violence.

¹The digital revolution has brought undeniable progress, but with it has come an alarming rise in cybercrimes. Financial scams and identity theft dominate headlines, while another insidious threat spreads quietly the phenomenon of virtual rape. Women and young girls particularly face relentless abuse, from crude verbal harassment in voice chats to terrifying scenarios where predators manipulate game mechanics to simulate sexual assault. These violations, though occurring in digital spaces, leave very real psychological scars.

This raises critical questions about how society and legal systems perceive these crimes. Physical rape is universally condemned as a heinous act, but its virtual counterpart often gets dismissed as "just game mechanics" or "online trolling." The law struggles to keep pace with these evolving digital crimes, creating dangerous gaps in justice and protection. As gaming becomes increasingly immersive through VR and metaverse technologies, the line between virtual and physical violation blurs further.

The gaming world stands at a crossroads. Will it remain a lawless frontier where predators operate with impunity, or can it transform into a safer space that protects all players? This article examines the grim reality of virtual sexual violence, its traumatic impact on victims, and the urgent changes needed from developers, lawmakers, and the gaming community itself. The time has come to acknowledge that crimes committed in digital spaces can be just as devastating as those in the physical world and demand equal seriousness in how we prevent and punish them.

¹ <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/cyber-rape-how-virtual-it-technology-and-society-p-113-117-1999>

WHAT IS VIRTUAL RAPE?

Virtual rape refers to a non-consensual sexual act that takes place in online spaces such as gaming platforms or virtual environments. It occurs when a person is harassed, exploited, or sexually assaulted in the digital world, often through the use of avatars. In most online games, players create their own digital representations, avatars to interact with others. However, when another individual manipulates, coerces, or forces inappropriate sexual behaviour upon these avatars, it constitutes virtual rape. Such acts may include simulated sexual assaults within games, creation of sexualized deepfakes, or the use of a victim's likeness to blackmail or humiliate them. Though these actions happen in virtual settings the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by the victims is very real and deeply damaging.

The word rape itself evokes deep fear in every woman's heart whether it happens online or offline, to a man or a woman, rape remains rape. The only difference lies in the form of pain: in physical rape, the body suffers, whereas in virtual rape, the mind and soul endure the same anguish, fear, and trauma. Victims of virtual assault experience the same emotions, anxiety, helplessness, and mental distress as those who endure physical violence. Their confidence shatters, and the fear of judgment often silences them. Many young people today earn money through gaming, sometimes without their families even knowing. When such families discover that their children have become victims of virtual rape, they struggle to understand or handle the situation. Instead of receiving support, victims often face blame or pressure from their own families, who might say, "We told you not to play these games." This reaction only adds to the victim's suffering. Already burdened by trauma, they now carry the weight of guilt, shame, and emotional isolation making recovery even harder.

Virtual rape is a dangerous phenomenon happening in the digital world the same online spaces where people play games and seek entertainment after a long, hectic day. Many players turn to gaming to relax, and they often assume that because an incident happened "digitally" it cannot cause real harm. This is a harmful misconception. Although there is no physical contact, the psychological impact of such abuse can be profound. The experience can lodge in a victim's mind, leading to depression, withdrawal, or thoughts of self-harm. In extreme cases, the trauma may also trigger angry or violent reactions. Because most people still underestimate the seriousness of virtual sexual violence, victims frequently suffer in silence without the support they need.

Recently in the UK, a young girl under the age of 16 became a victim of a virtual gang rape while using a virtual reality headset to play a game in the metaverse. Her avatar was attacked by several other players, turning what was meant to be an interactive experience into a horrifying incident. The British police were investigating this case, which is believed to be the first of its kind involving virtual rape.

When the news became public, the incident received mixed reactions from the public. Some people mocked the situation, saying that it was “just a game” and that “only avatars were involved,” while others recognized the seriousness of the assault and called it a deeply shameful act. However, what many fail to understand is that virtual rape is not about winning or losing a game it is a form of non-consensual sexual assault that leaves real emotional and psychological trauma on the victim.

There is a huge difference between being defeated in a game and being virtually assaulted. In this case, the victim experienced fear, humiliation, and helplessness, emotions similar to those felt by victims of physical sexual assault.

This is not the first time such an incident has been discussed. In 1993, journalist² Julian Dibbell wrote an article titled “A Rape in Cyberspace”, where he described a similar incident of virtual sexual assault. Although the act took place online, the victims reported the same emotional distress, anxiety, and breakdown that real-world victims experience.

Similarly, a senior police officer in the UK investigating the current case stated that the emotional and psychological impact of virtual rape can be as severe as that of a physical assault. The fear and trauma stay with the victim long after the incident, proving that even though the act happens in a virtual world, its consequences are painfully real.

This case received widespread public attention and raised serious questions about the responsibility of tech companies like Meta, which had promised to create safe online environments, especially for children. In 2021, a whistleblower named Frances Haugen revealed that Instagram, which is owned by Meta, had conducted internal research showing that the platform negatively impacts the mental health and self-esteem of teenage girls. Despite

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/05/metaverse-sexual-assault-vr-game-online-safety-meta>

knowing this, the company failed to take sufficient steps to address the issue.

Experts have also warned that virtual sex crimes in the metaverse are increasing and, if left uncontrolled, could become far more common. Reports have already confirmed that Meta's virtual reality platform, Horizon Worlds, has been the site of several virtual sexual assaults.

A researcher named Nina Jane Patel even shared her terrifying personal experience of being virtually gang-raped while using the metaverse platform. She described the experience as a "surreal nightmare," emphasizing that, unlike the physical world, the metaverse lacks clear laws, boundaries, or enforcement mechanisms to prevent such acts.

This highlights a major loophole in virtual environments: while they offer innovation and social connection, they also expose users, particularly women and children, to new and serious forms of abuse that current legal systems are not yet fully equipped to handle.

LEGAL RECOGNITION AND LOOPHOLES IN INDIA

India's legal system strongly condemns all forms of sexual offences. However, it still does not clearly recognize or define virtual rape and its corresponding punishments. The existing laws, including the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Information Technology Act, 2000, provide only partial remedies and lack a comprehensive legal framework to address crimes that occur in virtual environments.

In recent years, cases of sexual assault whether in the physical world or online have been rising sharply. Yet, many victims still hesitate to file an FIR due to financial barriers, lack of proper legal assistance, fear of social stigma, or delay in the judicial process. Although India has a strong legal system, people's faith in its accessibility and timely justice remains limited, which further discourages victims from seeking help.

Section 74 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) addresses sexual harassment, which is defined as: "Whoever assaults or uses criminal force to any woman, intending to outrage or knowing it to be likely that he will there by outrage her modesty, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which shall not be less than one year but which may extend to five years, and shall also be liable to fine." However, while acts such as sending obscene messages, making sexual comments during online gaming, or creating deepfakes may fall within the ambit of this section, it does not explicitly define or recognize virtual rape,

thereby creating a significant legal ambiguity in dealing with such crimes in digital spaces.

Section 79 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) deals with offences related to insulting the modesty of a woman. It states: ‘Whoever, intending to insult the modesty of any woman, utters any words, makes any sound or gesture, or exhibits any object in any form, intending that such word or sound shall be heard, or that such gesture or object shall be seen, by such woman, or intrudes upon the privacy of such woman, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, and also with fine.’ When such behaviour occurs in online spaces for example, through verbal abuse in a virtual environment, inappropriate gestures made by avatars, or the sending of offensive or sexually explicit messages it can amount to an offence under this section. This provision, therefore, has the potential to be extended to virtual platforms, though it still lacks direct recognition of avatar-based or digital harassment.

India’s Information Technology Act, 2000, under Sections 67 and 67A, deals with the publication and transmission of obscene and sexually explicit material in electronic form. These sections are often used when people share or circulate indecent content online. However, the major limitation is that they focus only on the distribution of such content, not on the virtual acts or interactive abuse that take place in online spaces like gaming platforms or the metaverse. In other words, the law recognizes the circulation of obscene material as an offence but does not address sexual violations committed through avatars or digital simulations, which are now becoming disturbingly common.

In addition, ³Section 67B of the IT Act was introduced to protect children from sexual exploitation online. This provision applies when a minor’s image, video, or avatar is misused or assaulted in digital spaces. For instance, in metaverse games, where users interact through avatars, if a child’s avatar is targeted or subjected to sexual acts, it technically falls within the spirit of this section. However, the law still lacks clarity and precision to deal with such complex cases of virtual child abuse, where no physical contact occurs but the psychological trauma and humiliation are equally real.

We also have the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, which is

³ BHARATIYA NYAYA SANHITA, 2023 Bare Act
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, 2000 Bare Act
POCSO Act, 2012

one of India's strongest laws for safeguarding minors from sexual offences. However, the Act primarily focuses on physical sexual assault and does not clearly extend to virtual rape or avatar-based sexual violence. This gap in legal coverage becomes even more concerning in today's digital age, where technology has advanced rapidly and virtual spaces have become a new ground for exploitation. It raises a serious question for lawmakers: when the world is progressing so fast technologically, shouldn't our laws and regulations evolve alongside it to ensure equal protection for victims in the digital realm?

Under Section 69 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the definition of rape is still tied to physical penetration. This means that a person who is sexually assaulted in a virtual environment has no explicit legal recognition or remedy under existing Indian laws. Victims of virtual rape cannot seek justice in the same way as those assaulted physically, even though the mental anguish, trauma, and fear remain the same. This absence of legal acknowledgment leaves victims vulnerable and offenders unpunished.

As technology continues to grow, offenders have become more sophisticated, often creating fake identities, manipulating deepfakes, or blackmailing victims using artificial intelligence tools. These digital crimes blur the boundaries between what is real and virtual, making it extremely difficult to prove intent, consent, or identity. This is where India urgently needs a modern and comprehensive cyber law framework that recognizes virtual rape and sexual harassment in online environments as serious criminal offences.

The issue also extends beyond national borders. Many virtual spaces and gaming platforms operate internationally, meaning that offenders and victims may belong to different countries. In such cases, it becomes difficult for law enforcement agencies to take action due to jurisdictional challenges. To overcome this, India should work towards international treaties or cooperative mechanisms that allow cross-border investigation and extradition of offenders involved in virtual sexual crimes. Collaborative efforts between countries, along with the assistance of major tech companies, can help create a safer global digital environment.

Furthermore, it is essential to strengthen and modernize cyber policing in India. Cyber officers must receive advanced training to understand emerging technologies like virtual reality, deepfakes, and artificial intelligence, which are increasingly used to commit such offences. Awareness programs must also be launched nationwide to educate people about digital consent, online safety, and the legal consequences of cyber sexual crimes. Schools, colleges, and digital

platforms should actively participate in spreading awareness and building a culture of respect and accountability in the online world.

NEED FOR LEGAL REFORM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

As the line between physical rape and virtual rape continues to fade, the demand for comprehensive and strong legal reform has become not just necessary but urgent. With the world becoming increasingly digital and people spending large portions of their lives in online spaces, crimes that once seemed impossible are now taking place in virtual environments. Yet, our current legal framework including the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the POCSO Act, 2012 primarily focuses on physical crimes or the distribution of obscene material online. These laws do not address the deeper psychological and emotional harm caused by sexual violence in digital spaces, leaving victims of virtual assault without adequate legal protection or recognition.

The first and most crucial step toward progress is to create a clear and explicit legal definition of “virtual rape.” The law must recognize that such crimes can occur through avatars, deepfake videos, virtual reality (VR) simulations, online games, or any other digital medium where a person’s consent is violated. The law should specifically state that “whoever attempts to commit any sexual offence through deepfakes, avatars, virtual reality, online games, or any other digital simulation without the consent of the individual, with or without intention, shall be punished.” The punishment and fine should be equivalent to those for physical rape, because regardless of the medium whether it takes place in the real world or a digital one rape remains a grave violation of human dignity. The trauma it inflicts on victims is real, long-lasting, and emotionally devastating.

Secondly, it is imperative to introduce amendments in existing legislations like the BNS, IT Act, and POCSO Act to include and criminalize such forms of virtual sexual violence. The cyber police must be empowered, better equipped, and highly trained to deal with technologically advanced crimes. Offenders today use fake identities, artificial intelligence, and deepfake technology to harass or exploit women and children, making it harder to prove intention or consent. Therefore, cybercrime units need continuous training to understand new digital patterns and catch offenders efficiently.

Equally important is the creation of a cross-border legal cooperation mechanism. Virtual

environments have no geographical boundaries; an offender sitting in another country can assault a victim in India using a fake account or avatar. Hence, international treaties and collaborations must be formed to ensure that foreign governments cooperate in identifying and punishing offenders. Such cooperation would also enable countries to share technical expertise and investigation tools, making cyberspace safer for everyone.

In addition, educational institutions, law universities, and legal luminaries should take proactive steps in spreading awareness about these crimes. Schools and colleges should include sessions on digital ethics, consent, and online safety, teaching young people to identify and report such behaviour. Law students and professionals should research and advocate for reforms in this area so that future lawmakers are well-prepared to address digital sexual crimes. The general public must also be made aware of their rights, reporting mechanisms, and available legal remedies, ensuring that victims do not suffer in silence or fear social stigma.

Equally vital is the aspect of mental health care and emotional rehabilitation for victims of virtual rape. The trauma experienced by such victims is as real as that of physical rape survivors. Feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and psychological distress are common. Victims must have access to counseling, therapy, and support systems that help them rebuild their confidence and mental peace.

Finally, lawmakers, technology companies, and digital platforms like Meta, X (Twitter), and online gaming networks must take moral and legal responsibility to detect and remove sexually abusive or violent content. They should create transparent reporting mechanisms that allow victims to safely report online assaults and ensure that their cases are handled promptly. Platforms should also publish transparency reports detailing the number of complaints received, investigated, and resolved. This level of accountability will not only protect victims but also build public trust in digital spaces.

CONCLUSION

In today's world, where technology has advanced beyond imagination, no one could have ever thought that people would use it for something as horrifying as committing sexual crimes online. The idea that someone could carry out such a heinous act in a virtual world shows how deeply twisted human thinking can become. Virtual rape is not just a hidden or behind-the-screen offence; it is a serious crime that leaves lasting scars on the victim's mind and destroys

their mental peace.

Although India has several progressive laws like the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the POCSO Act, 2012, there is still an urgent need for a specific law that directly deals with virtual rape. I am not suggesting that new laws or amendments be rushed overnight but it is crucial that our legal system begins to recognize virtual rape as a real and punishable form of rape. The cyber police must be properly trained to understand new digital techniques and track offenders who misuse technology.

Mental health support must also be given to virtual rape survivors, because the trauma they experience is as real and painful as that of any physical assault victim. This fight is not only about protecting people in virtual reality, it is a fight for humanity itself. Rape, in any form, destroys a person's dignity and sense of safety. It is time our laws move beyond physical boundaries and extend their protection into the digital world whether it's in real life or in the metaverse.