

We're more passive than we predict when sexually harassed, new study shows

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Sexual harassment is devastating in and of itself for its victims, but new research shows there can be an even more insidious and troubling consequence that goes along with it.

When confronted with sexual harassment, we don't stand up for ourselves to the extent we believe we will, and because we use false predictions as a [benchmark](#), we condemn others who are passive in the face of sexual harassment, according to a new study co-authored by Ann Tenbrunsel, professor of [business ethics](#) at the University of Notre Dame.

In "Double Victimization in the Workplace: Why Observers Condemn Passive [Victims](#) of Sexual Harassment," forthcoming in [Organization Science](#), Tenbrunsel, and researchers from the University of Utah and Brigham Young and Northwestern Universities, conducted five studies that explored observers' condemnation of passive victims.

Pointing to the 1991 Senate confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas' appointment to the Supreme Court, the researchers note that Anita Hill testified she had been sexually harassed by Thomas during his tenure as head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. She testified that despite being harassed numerous times years before, at no point did she confront Thomas about his behavior or take any action against the harassment. Her claim of repeated sexual harassment and perpetual inaction led to public suspicion with and condemnation of Anita Hill.

Far from being an isolated incident, the case illustrates a trend that prevails even today.

"If we can increase the accuracy of our predictions and realize we won't stand up for ourselves as often as we would like to think, we will be less condemning of other victims," Tenbrunsel says.

In the first two studies, [observers](#) predicted they would be more confrontational than victims typically are, and this led to greater judgment of other passive victims, including unwillingness to work with them and to recommend them for a job.

The third study identified the failure to consider what may motivate victims to be passive, and the final two studies reduced condemnation of passive sexual harassment victims by highlighting their likely motivations at the time of the harassment and by having participants recall a past experience of their own when they did not act in the face of intimidation in the workplace, a situation related to but distinct from [sexual harassment](#).

The results from these studies add insights into the causes and consequences of victim condemnation and help explain why passivity in the face of harassment—the predominant response—is subject to so much scorn.

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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