

# Thesis reveals gender gap in reactions to women's sexual assault stories

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Research master student Linda Bomm found in her thesis that men, compared to women, believe female sexual assault survivors less, blame women more, and judge them more negatively—especially if they identify strongly with their male gender.

"When women tell others that they were sexually assaulted, they often face negative social reactions like disbelief, victim-blaming, and negative judgments—or people emphasize that 'not all men' would

commit such acts," says Linda Bomm, one of the winners of the FSW Thesis Award.

"These reactions have negative effects on survivors' mental health and can stop them from reporting the assault. In my thesis, I researched the relation between showing such negative reactions and people's gender, their social identification with their own gender, and their psychophysiological threat levels."

## **How did you research this?**

"In two studies (one online, one in the lab with psychophysiological measures), participants reacted to recordings of different women's voices, of which one described being sexually assaulted by a man, and the others described being in a bike accident or mugged by a man."

## **What did you find?**

"We found that men (compared to women) believed the women in the voice recordings less, blamed them more, and judged them more negatively. Compared to women, men also perceived more strongly that men differ from each other, and that men face as much stigma in today's society as women. Men who identified highly with their own gender also saw the woman who talked about being sexually assaulted by a man as less moral than they saw the other women they listened to in the recordings.

"This is remarkable because men's gender identification affected only the morality judgments they made about female sexual assault survivors, not about female survivors of other crimes. The effect was reversed for [women](#). In the lab, we found that when men discussed a woman's sexual assault, they showed higher cardiovascular threat levels than when they

discussed a woman's bike accident experience.

"In the spirit of transparently reporting results, I think it is also important to note where we did not find what we expected: We expected men's gender identification to influence their cardiovascular threat levels, and their threat levels to influence their reactions to the disclosed experiences, but we did not find this in our study."

## **What has been the most valuable lesson you've learned writing your thesis?**

"Academically, I would say the most valuable lesson I learned about designing and conducting a study is to stay concise and feasible in your [research design](#). I kept finding new angles to look at the topic or wanting to add more variables to the design, but ultimately had to remind myself that if I ever wanted to finish this project, I had to 'kill my darlings,' as my supervisor put it.

"On a personal level, it may sound cheesy, but the most valuable lesson I learned was that it's worth it to ask for the things you want—I was surprised that my supervisor (Daan Scheepers) was so open to my ideas and supported me in researching this extremely important topic. Also, it's okay to do things in your own time. Ultimately, I worked on my thesis for a year, and while that is longer than most of my fellow students took, it was the right decision for me."

## **What are your future plans?**

"Since October 2023, I'm a Ph.D. student in Political Psychology at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research at the University of Amsterdam. My thesis project really finalized my decision to pursue a career in academia, and so far, it's been very interesting and exciting. I

am also working on publishing the thesis in a [scientific journal](#) with my thesis supervisor."

## **What is your message for students who still need to write their thesis, but are finding it stressful or overwhelming?**

"Take your time, trust yourself and your own abilities, and dare to propose research topics that you find the most interesting or relevant. That way, it's way easier to get through motivation dips, and sometimes you can be surprised by how open others are to your ideas."

Provided by Leiden University

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