

# White men who experience workplace harassment become allies of diversity efforts

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White men who have experienced workplace harassment themselves are more likely to support efforts to combat race and gender bias in their organizations, according to a new University of Michigan study. The findings [appear](#) in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

White men are less likely than women and people of color to experience discrimination and harassment in the workforce. However, when [white men](#) are treated poorly by their colleagues, they are more likely to recognize race and gender bias happening in their organizations and are more likely to take action, the study indicated.

"White men will be allies in workplace diversity and inclusion efforts only to the extent they recognize that race and gender bias exists in their workplaces and are willing to act," said study author Erin Cech, U-M associate professor of sociology.

Cech used [survey data](#) from more than 11,000 workers in 24 [federal agencies](#) (including 5,000 white men). A third of white men had experienced some kind of harassment at work like bullying or physical intimidation. These men were more likely than other white men to recognize the systemic race and gender bias that their colleagues faced, and were also more likely to take action—to report the incidents of bias they witnessed to their colleagues and supervisors, the findings showed.

When white men experience harassment, it dispels a taken-for-granted belief that their workplace operates meritocratically, Cech said. This belief can serve as a blinder to [bias](#) recognition and reporting.

"Harassment experiences can lower these meritocratic blinders and introduce opportunities for white men to consider how the workplace might not be fair for their colleagues," she said.

Cech noted that the findings have important implications for organizational antiracism and antisexism efforts.

"Of course, the takeaway is not that we should increase harassment toward white men," Cech said. "Rather, white men who have had the unfortunate experience of being bullied or threatened at work might be unexpected allies in diversity and inclusion efforts.

"Asking white men to reflect on their own negative treatment at work can foster fruitful skepticism about the meritocratic operation of their workplace. This skepticism may facilitate a greater willingness to acknowledge [unfair treatment](#) experienced by colleagues and take action."

Workplace diversity and inclusion efforts, she said, must take into account that white men often take the treatment they experience at work as proxies for the experiences of their female and racial minority colleagues. White men's critique of the status quo through reflection on their workplace treatment may stave off defensiveness and "backlash" that often undermines organizational change.

**More information:** Erin A. Cech, Lowering Their Meritocratic Blinders: White Men's Harassment Experiences and Their Recognition and Reporting of Workplace Race and Gender Bias, *American Journal of Sociology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/728738](https://doi.org/10.1086/728738)

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