

Victim-blamers have empathy, but it's mostly for perpetrators

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New research suggests men's empathy for other men, rather than a lack of empathy for women, may be more important in explaining why they are more likely than women to side with an accused male

You may have seen it among your own friends: a high-profile #MeToo case triggers responses that assign some or all the blame on a victim of sexual harassment, with men more likely than women to side with an accused male.

New research published Sunday in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* suggests it is men's empathy for other men, rather than their lack of empathy for women, that may be more important in explaining this effect.

"Men are accused of not being empathic enough—I would say they are as empathic as women, they just might have a different focus," Renata Bongiorno, who led the research, at the University of Exeter told AFP.

More encouragingly, the work also found "victim-blaming" among men fell when were they were asked to see a situation from a woman's perspective—a possible path towards mobilizing both genders against sexual harassment and assault.

The paper described two studies involving around 230 Australian university students who were asked to read about a clear-cut incident of [sexual harassment](#) created for the research using examples drawn from real life.

The incident related to a female [student](#) who was harassed by a male student on the same campus.

Over a period of several months, he made repeated unwanted advances that included slapping her buttocks, placing his arms around her waist, and emailing her pornographic images with suggestions they engage in the same acts.

On several occasions after drinking he would bang on her door

demanding to be let in to "cuddle," then insult her when she refused to unlock her door.

When the female student finally brought the incident to the college's attention, the male student admitted to most of the allegations but insisted he had been joking around, did not mean to upset her, and believed she "enjoyed the attention."

'Dark' side of empathy

In the first study, overall levels of victim-blaming were low and men and women showed equal levels of empathy for the female victim.

But men showed greater empathy for the male perpetrator, which helped to explain why they were more likely than women to blame the victim.

Bongiorno said this conformed to social identity theory in which members of a so-called "ingroup" are more likely to empathize with other members of the same group and engage in excusing behaviors.



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In the second study, participants were asked to focus on how the incidents would affect the life of either the male or [female student](#) moving forward.

Both men and [women](#) who focused on the male perpetrator's point of view showed greater empathy for him and blamed the female victim more.

When they were asked to focus on the female victim's point of view, victim-blaming was lower by comparison for both genders.

Bongiorno argued that media depictions that focused too heavily on the potential impact on accused male harassers' careers and lives had damaging consequences that made it harder for victims to speak up.

But she said: "I was encouraged by the second study, where we showed that when men have their attention turned toward the victim, their [empathy](#) for the male perpetrator was reduced along with their victim blaming.

"I think that's a positive message and way forward for the future."

More information: Renata Bongiorno et al, Why Women Are Blamed for Being Sexually Harassed: The Effects of Empathy for Female Victims and Male Perpetrators, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2019). [dx.doi.org/10.1177/0361684319868730](https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319868730)

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