

Study highlights why people who are sexually harassed might not come forward immediately, or at all

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New research has revealed there is a gap between how people imagine they'd act if sexually harassed and how those who experience it respond.

The study, by the University of Exeter, published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, discovered that seeking justice by coming forward is just one of the needs people who experience [sexual harassment](#) consider after the event, with other needs, including those for safety, instead rated as more important.

The research may explain why people who are sexually harassed often don't report their experience formally, with the 2017 Crime Survey England and Wales finding that five out of six people who are targeted by sexual offenses do not report it to the police.

Researchers compared answers from a confidential online survey from people who have experienced sexual harassment to those who have not but were asked to imagine how they would react. People who have experienced sexual harassment reported a range of needs and engaged in a variety of actions to meet these needs. Needs for safety, personal control and [social support](#) were prioritized over formal actions, such as reporting to police. Those who had not encountered sexual harassment anticipated having stronger needs and taking more actions—especially formal ones.

Senior author, Professor Manuela Barreto, from the University of Exeter said, "We found there is a widely held belief that quick and formal reporting is the correct response to sexual harassment. It's what's generally meant with the phrase, coming forward." Yet most people who are sexually harassed do not report it formally and those who do, often report the offense a significant time after it happened. There's a focus on procedural barriers with police and other authorities as to why this is, but less attention paid to the actual needs of the person who has experienced sexual harassment.

"Our research suggests there's a gap between what people expect from those who have been sexually harassed and how those who experience it

actually respond. It's important to consider that the feelings and actions of someone who has experienced sexual harassment might be very different from those who have not. Instead of asking; 'why people don't come forward more often?', we should perhaps ask ourselves; 'what is the best action for the individual?'"

Across two studies researchers analyzed answers from participants who have experienced sexual harassment about the actions they took, alongside those from participants who haven't experienced sexual assault but were asked to imagine how they'd react if they did. In the first study 415 participants from mixed genders took part (259 experienced, 156 imaginers) and after finding no [gender differences](#), the second study was conducted with women only (589 participants—301 experienced, 288 imaginers), who are much more commonly sexually harassed.

Lead author, Professor Thomas Morton, worked at the University of Exeter on the research and is now at the University of Copenhagen. He said, "There is an assumption that those who experience sexual harassment are primarily guided by their desire for justice. But this research shows that peoples' needs are wider than what others might expect, and include needs for safety, [personal control](#), and for life to just return to normal. Of all the needs that people expressed, the need for justice was not the highest priority. This might explain why people don't take the kind of formal actions, like reporting to police, that others expect them to."

"There are often accusations—including high profile recent examples—that if people who experience sexual harassment don't come forward at the time, it's because it wasn't that serious or perhaps even true. But if you have not experienced sexual harassment, it is hard to accurately anticipate what you might need, and therefore what you would do to satisfy those needs. Our research suggests that the assumptions people make are often wrong, or at least don't reflect what

the people who have experienced sexual [harassment](#) say they need."

More information: Thomas A. Morton et al, What Would a "Reasonable Person" Do? Exploring the Gap Between Experienced and Anticipated Responses to Sexual Harassment, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/03616843231170761](https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843231170761)

Provided by University of Exeter

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