

# Why We Fail to Report Sexual Harassment

by Stefanie K. Johnson, Jessica Kirk, and Ksenia Keplinger

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Last month, Fox News agreed to pay Gretchen Carlson \$20 million to settle her sexual harassment lawsuit against Roger Ailes, the network’s former Chairman and CEO, who resigned in the summer. In light of increasing evidence against Ailes, colleagues and high-profile figures who had previously doubted Carlson began apologizing for not supporting her. For example, Geraldo Rivera said in a Facebook post, “Like victims of sexual assault, those alleging harassment deserve the presumption of credibility.”

The Ailes case commanded a lot of media attention, but it was not all that unique. Even though the Bureau of Labor Statistics finds that 70% of employers provide sexual harassment training and 98% of companies have sexual harassment policies, the number of sexual harassment claims filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is significant – there were 6,822 claims of sexual harassment in 2015. And we continue to hear stories about sexual harassment in academia, medicine, science, and engineering driving women out of STEM.

After conducting a qualitative study of 31 women in predominantly masculine industries, we also saw that sexual harassment continues to be a problem for women. Although our study focused on the effects of attractiveness and not explicitly on sexual harassment, 75% of the women we interviewed mentioned they had been sexually harassed at work. They cited it as a cost to being attractive, and few spoke up for themselves or others. Indeed, a 2015 survey showed that 71% of women do not report sexual harassment, and far fewer bystanders report harassment that they have witnessed.

Why do so few victims and observers report sexual harassment? Why were many Fox employees initially so reluctant to stand up for Carlson?

Our interviews pointed to three potential reasons why it can be difficult to speak up about sexual harassment: fear of retaliation, the bystander effect, and a masculine culture that permits sexual harassment.

### **Fear of retaliation**

Just as in the Carlson case, many of the women we interviewed said they did not report harassment against themselves or others because of fear of retaliation by the harasser or organization. There's a reason for this—research has found that sexual harassment can be trivialized by organizations or result in hostility and retaliation against the victim. For example, Megan, a woman we spoke to who works in finance, explained that after being harassed by a colleague, she went to HR and asked to move to a different position. Her request was not granted, and not long after, she was written up for an unrelated and trivial infraction. In another case, Janet, a public relations executive, saw the chief legal officer of her company sexually harass an employee, but didn't report it. She remembers thinking, "It would be political suicide if I complained about him."

### **The Bystander Effect**

Another reason individuals may fail to speak out against sexual harassment is something called the bystander effect, which says that we are less likely to help a victim when others are also present. The bystander effect occurs for two reasons: diffusion of responsibility (if others are present, someone feels that other observers are responsible for intervening) and social influence (bystanders observe others' behavior to determine the correct behavior; so if no one is intervening then that seems to be the correct behavior, as people abide by the status quo). This can even give the appearance that the behavior is condoned by observers.

In our study, many women talked about the awkwardness of seeing someone be harassed or being harassed and not knowing what to do. For example, Carla, an urban planner, explained how she handled a male colleague making an inappropriate remark to her: "I was just kind of was dumbfounded. I just really didn't expect it. I didn't know what to say... He said it in front of another woman who I was talking to, and we both kind of looked at each other and was like what? Did he really just say that?" But neither person did anything about it.

### **Masculine culture**

A third factor that may reduce the likelihood of reporting sexual harassment is a highly male-dominated organization and/or highly masculine culture. In very masculine work cultures, some men use the subjugation of women as a way to relate to other men and prove their masculinity, while reinforcing women's lower status. At the same time, women who want to be part of the high-status group may play along with sexual harassment because they do not want to be further alienated from the high-status group (men). Women may even start to adopt the same behaviors as men to fit in and be "one of the guys." This creates an irony that women may be ignoring or downplaying sexual harassment to gain access to the "boys' club" while men are using sexual harassment to keep women out. Betty, a software engineer, told us, "I had a guy ask me if I've had any work done up there... I've learned to respond kind of with the *funny* thing. I said, 'I sure have. I just had a crown and a root canal last week.'" Although downplaying inappropriate behavior may be effective at neutralizing the situation in the short term, it can still have negative long-term effects on the employee's health, job satisfaction, and productivity.

So what can we do to reduce fear around reporting sexual harassment? There are a few ways organizations can be proactive about encouraging people to speak up when they see something wrong, and this may go a long way toward decreasing levels of sexual harassment in organizations:

- Train employees in bystander training, so people are clear about what to do if they directly observe or are informed about sexual harassment. Bystander training (rather than typical sexual harassment training which focuses on what to do if you are harassed) focuses on what you should do if you see someone else being harassed. This involves four steps: make observers aware of the problem so they can identify it when they see it, teach observers that help should always be given, increase accountability of the observer so they know that they responsible to help, and inform observers of the process for intervening. Organizations should encourage all observers to report or intervene when they're aware of an issue, but it's worth noting that interventions might be particularly effective when initiated by men. Particularly in male-dominated fields, appealing to men to speak up and stop tolerating this behavior may be a key way of reducing sexual harassment.
- Develop clearer HR and reporting systems. Individuals need clear HR systems through which they can report observations and experiences of sexual harassment. Processes to reduce risks of retaliation or gossip also need to be in place to reduce the fear of reporting. The Society for Human Resource Management recommends (1) having clear definitions of what constitutes harassment, (2) including examples of prohibited conduct, (3) explaining how victims and witnesses of harassment should respond to and report harassment, (4) outlining how HR should handle the process, and (5) expressing what disciplinary measures should be followed. Importantly, all complaints should be treated as confidential. (The EEOC adds that all employees should be protected against retaliation.)
- Assess and improve your culture. Organizations can send out regular confidential culture surveys to keep their finger on the pulse of the company's culture. Ensuring that women have supportive supervisors, work groups, and cultures can also reduce risk of sexual harassment. Cultures that reflect an intolerance for sexual harassment are built when top management is committed to reducing sexual harassment, when there are zero-tolerance policies in place, when harassment-free notifications are sent to applicants and new hires, and when regular organizational assessments and regular training explicitly address the issue. More generally, it may be time to rethink the masculine cultures that characterize so many workplaces.

Researchers estimate that sexual harassment costs organizations \$22,500 a year in lost productivity for each employee affected, while harassment leads employees to often experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Given its negative effects on productivity, employee job satisfaction, commitment, and physical and psychological health, managers and organizations need to do more to root out and prevent sexual harassment.

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
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