

Gender Prototypes Shape Perceptions of and Responses to Sexual Harassment

Cheryl R. Kaiser¹ , Bryn Bandt-Law¹, Nathan N. Cheek² , and Rebecca Schachtman¹

¹Department of Psychology, University of Washington, and ²Department of Psychology, Princeton University

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Abstract

We provide a model describing how the narrow prototype of women as having conventionally feminine attributes and identities serves as a barrier to perceiving sexual harassment and appropriately responding to sexual-harassment claims when the victims of harassment do not resemble this prototype. We review research documenting that this narrow prototype of women overlaps with mental representations of sexual-harassment targets. The prototype of women harms women who diverge from this prototype: Their experiences with sexual harassment are less likely to be perceived as such, and they experience more negative interpersonal, organizational, and legal consequences when they experience harassment. Perceptions of sexual harassment are the catalyst by which sexual harassment is recognized and remedied. Thus, narrow gender prototypes may impede the promise and potential of civil rights laws and antiharassment policy.

Keywords

sexual harassment, prototypes, perceptions of discrimination, gender, intersectionality

In the years after the #MeToo Movement ignited a national reckoning about sexual harassment, Tarana Burke, its founder, saw a troubling narrowing in its focus. A narrative developed, Burke argued, “that it’s [#MeToo] only for a certain type of person—that it’s for white, cisgender, heterosexual, famous women” (cited in Rowley, 2018, para. 7). Indeed, whether in the results of an Internet image search or the pages of *The New York Times*, harassment victims are most frequently portrayed as young, White, physically attractive, and traditionally feminine (Bandt-Law et al., 2021), despite the fact that women of color, queer women, and less stereotypically feminine women are especially likely to experience sexual harassment (e.g., Konik & Cortina, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Rossie et al., 2020). We draw on the psychology of prototypes to provide a framework for understanding how the prototype of women overlaps with this narrow and inaccurate representation of sexual-harassment victims, and the consequences of this gender prototype for believing, understanding, and supporting sexual-harassment victims.

conduct and advances that adversely affect workplace performance or employment status or that produce a hostile work environment. Sexual harassment can be manifest as sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment (when hostile beliefs about women are conveyed through actions such as making crude comments and telling crude jokes; U.S. EEOC, 2002). Sexual harassment can stem from multiple motivations, including sexual desire, hostility toward women, and the desire to dominate women (Berdahl & Raver, 2011). We focus on sexual harassment targeting women because most sexual-harassment targets are women, and the corresponding literature and legal scholarship focuses on women’s experiences. Nonetheless, our framework provides a foundation for scholarship on men and nonbinary people who experience harassment because individuals with these gender identities are also excluded from prototypical representations of harassment victims and may encounter mistreatment and neglect like that we describe in this review.

What Is Sexual Harassment?

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as unwelcome sexual

Corresponding Author:

Cheryl R. Kaiser, Department of Psychology, University of Washington
Email: ckaiser@uw.edu

Perceiving Sexual Harassment

Perceptions of sexual harassment are the catalyst in bringing sexual-harassment claims forward for remediation. However, perceptions are subjective—shaped by motivations, life experiences, and cognitive frameworks—and this results in ambiguity as to whether any given event is perceived as harassment (Kaiser & Major, 2006). Drawing from perspectives on prototypes (Rosch, 1973) and perceptions of discrimination (Major et al., 2002), we propose that gender prototypes shape perceptions of sexual harassment. Specifically, because perceiving sexual harassment requires connecting a potentially harassing behavior to a woman's membership in a gender group (Goh et al., 2022), the degree of a woman's resemblance to the prototype, or mental representation, of her gender group can facilitate or hinder perceptions that she is a victim of sexual harassment—a judgment with potentially profound consequences elaborated below.

What Is the Prototype of a Woman?

A prototype is an abstract, fuzzy set of shared features describing the idealized member of a category (Rosch, 1973). People assess potential category members' resemblance to the prototype and more quickly recognize those with more overlap with the prototype as category members (Rosch, 1973). In Western cultures, prototypical women possess a warm, sympathetic, and nurturing interpersonal orientation and engage in feminine activities linked with traditional gender roles (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). Prototypical women are further expected to be heterosexual, White, and attractive (Crenshaw, 1989; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Nonprototypical women, conversely, violate idealized expectations of womanhood. They embody stereotypical masculine characteristics and traits, such as dominance; upset the status quo of traditional gender roles; engage in masculine activities; and may possess non-White and non-heterosexual identities.

Two Approaches to Prototypes

Prototype fit can be studied from two perspectives: *within-category variation* in attributes associated with the prototype and membership in *intersectional categories*, that is, membership in a category of interest and one or more other social categories. In the present context, within-category variation refers to women's variation in whether they possess traits and behaviors that are prototypical of the group, and the within-category perspective acknowledges that this variation shapes group members' experiences and treatment from

other people. The within-category approach departs from the assumption that all category members fit similarly with their group's prototype and are equally understood through the group lens, thereby illuminating which group members are most likely to experience bias (Kaiser & Wilkins, 2010).

The intersectional approach to prototypes, derived from legal scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989), is grounded in the idea that individuals who possess devalued intersectional identities are considered nonprototypical of the broader social categories to which they belong. Examples of such intersectional groups include Black women, lesbian women, and older women. People who possess devalued intersectional identities experience "intersectional invisibility" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008), whereby they are not fully recognized as belonging to their constituent groups. For instance, Black women are not seen as fully Black or fully women because Black men are the prototypical representation of Black people and White women are the prototypical representation of womanhood. Intersectional invisibility causes neglect of the contributions of people with intersectional identities and dismissal of their claims of bias (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

We propose a prototype model of sexual-harassment perceptions (Fig. 1) as a framework for understanding sexual harassment targeting women. We theorize that gender prototypes moderate the relationships between noticing a potentially sexually harassing event and perceiving (labeling) that event as harassment (Path A) and between perceiving sexual harassment and the downstream consequences of that perception (Path B). Specifically, the more women diverge from the prototype of a woman in both within-category attributes and intersectional identities, the less other people, irrespective of their gender, will perceive potentially sexually harassing behaviors those nonprototypical women experience as sexual harassment (Path A), and the more negative interpersonal, organizational, and legal consequences these nonprototypical women will incur even when these events are labeled as sexual harassment (Path B). The model illustrates when and why certain sexual-harassment victims encounter disbelief, neglect, and barriers to attaining recourse. Note that the model focuses on the prototypes held by perceivers, such as observers, employers, and legal gatekeepers and decision makers (e.g., lawyers, judges, and juries), and the role of their perceptions in shaping consequences for targets of sexual harassment.

The model uses the science of mental representation to provide an integrative framework for understanding when and why some victims of sexual harassment are disbelieved and unsupported. Our approach diverges from motivational perspectives centered on power,

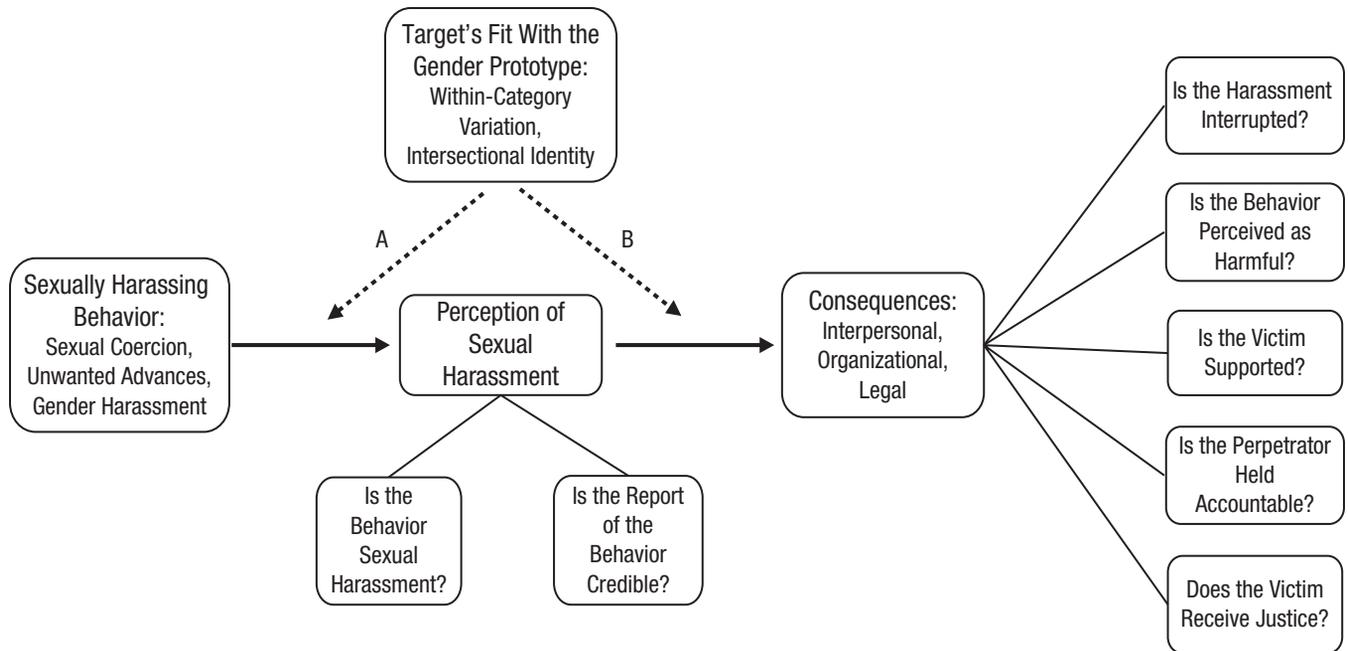


Fig. 1. The prototype model of sexual-harassment perceptions. The model maps the potential effects of perceiving and responding to sexual harassment through the lens of narrow gender prototypes. When people think of sexual harassment, they envision prototypical women. Prototypes can moderate whether potentially sexually harassing behaviors are labeled as such and judged as credible (Path A) and can also moderate the consequences of perceived sexual harassment, including interpersonal, organizational, and legal responses (Path B). The gender prototypicality of the harassment victim may shape the extent to which the harassment is interrupted and perceived as harmful, the victim is supported, the perpetrator is held accountable, and the victim has access to justice. Although our review of research concerning these consequences focuses on their moderation by gender prototypes, they may also be indirectly shaped by gender prototypes via biased perceptions of sexual harassment (e.g., failure to recognize harassment in the first place).

threat, and dominance, which tend to focus on the factors that cause harassment (Berdahl & Raver, 2011; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018); in contrast, our approach focuses on the interpretation of potential harassment and the downstream consequences. Although the prototype framework is compatible with alternative theories of mental representations (e.g., semantic associations), it has an advantage in that it provides a less binary and essentialist way to represent gender categories compared with associative frameworks, which typically require methods that contrast two opposing binary gender concepts (i.e., male/female). By avoiding methods with a binary approach to gender, the model has room for expansion to tests with a broader range of gender identities, which is useful given that prototypes of women may largely concern mental representations of femininity, an attribute possessed by people along the full spectrum of gender identities (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021). A prototype framework is also potentially more integrative than associative accounts because prototypical group members possess multiple characteristics and identities (e.g., femininity, Whiteness, youth) that together shape person perception (Rosch, 1973). Whereas associations may capture semantic relationships between specific binary categories and harassment, a prototype perspective affords

an opportunity to combine within-category and intersectional approaches to social perceptions to understand how targets' traits and multiple distinct identities jointly shape how people think about harassment.

This model also highlights a “prototype paradox”: The people who disproportionately bear the brunt of sexual harassment are not the people who are typically imagined to be the targets of sexual harassment and responded to as such. Women who are nonprototypical on both within-category attributes and intersectional dimensions are disproportionately targeted by sexual harassment. For example, from 2012 to 2016, Black women filed sexual-harassment charges at nearly 3 times the rate of White women and are overrepresented in claims filed in every industry (Rossie et al., 2020). Further, women of color, queer women, and more masculine women are harassed at higher rates than White women, straight women, and more feminine women (Bergman & Drasgow, 2003; Cortina et al., 1998; McLaughlin et al., 2012). These disparities are driven by nonprototypical women's actual experiences of sexual harassment, not by their being more likely than prototypical women to label harassing behavior as such or to report sexual harassment, and not by their finding sexually harassing behaviors more offensive (Berdahl,

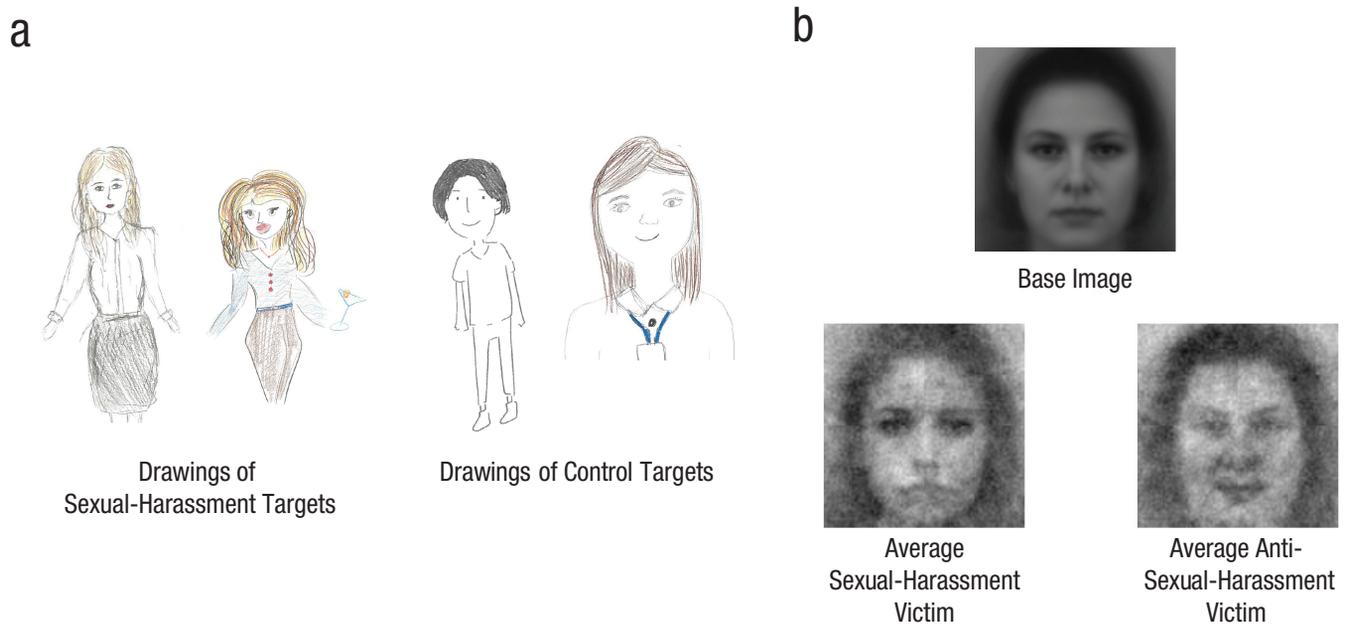


Fig. 2. Results from Goh et al. (2022). The drawings in (a) are examples of participants' renderings of women described as having been sexually harassed versus knocked over (from Study A1). The images in (b) are examples of the base face and resulting participant-generated reverse-correlation composite images of sexual-harassment targets and anti-sexual-harassment targets (from Study A5; see the text for details). From "Narrow Prototypes and Neglected Victims: Understanding Perceptions of Sexual Harassment," by J. X. Goh, B. Bandt-Law, N. N. Cheek, S. Sinclair, and C. R. Kaiser, 2022, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 122(5), p. 878 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000260>). Copyright 2022 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

2007; Cassino & Besen-Cassino, 2019). Thus, our model suggests that narrow gender prototypes create misperceptions about who is victimized by harassment that may prevent women who are most in need from receiving support.

Are Sexual-Harassment Victims Represented as Prototypical Women?

The model in Figure 1 stems from foundational scholarship demonstrating that the mental representation of sexual-harassment targets overlaps substantially with the prototype of women. That is, when people think about victims of sexual harassment, they imagine women who possess feminine attributes and characteristics and who belong to privileged social groups. To test whether people imagine prototypical women when they think of targets of sexual harassment, we (Goh et al., 2022, Study A1) had participants read about a woman whose boss discretely groped her (sexual-harassment condition) or accidentally knocked her down (control condition). Participants then drew the woman. Raters blind to the study's purpose and participants' experimental condition coded the drawings. The drawings of sexually harassed women were rated as more prototypically female (e.g., "feminine," "like other women") than were the drawings of women portrayed in the control condition (Fig. 2a). In additional studies

(Goh et al., 2022, Studies B2–B4), identical faces were perceived as more prototypically female when labeled as having experienced sexual harassment than when labeled as having experienced control events.

In another study (Goh et al., 2022, Study A5), we used a reverse-correlation task (Dotsch & Todorov, 2012) to visualize participants' mental representations of sexual-harassment victims. In each trial of this task, a random noise pattern was superimposed on a base image (in this case, an average of many White women's faces), and then the inverse noise pattern was separately superimposed on the base image. This resulted in two trial images with opposite noise patterns. Participants selected which of these two images better represented a sexual-harassment victim. This data-driven paradigm leverages random-noise generation to create each trial's stimuli in order to prevent researchers' assumptions from shaping the results of a study through how they choose the stimuli (e.g., if researchers choose faces differing on only a limited number of attributes).

In our study (Goh et al., 2022, Study A5), participants completed 500 reverse-correlation trials, which yielded a set of images selected by participants as looking like a sexual-harassment victim and a set of images not selected by participants as looking like a sexual-harassment victim (i.e., perceived as an "anti-sexual-harassment" victim). The average of all the noise patterns from the selected

images was then superimposed on the base image, which generated an average image of participants' mental representation of a sexual-harassment victim. The average of all the noise patterns from the nonselected images was similarly superimposed on the base image, which generated an average image of participants' mental representation of a nonvictim (Fig. 2b). The resulting images of the sexual-harassment victim and the anti-sexual-harassment victim were evaluated by a separate group of coders who were naive with respect to the sexual-harassment conditions that resulted in participants' generation of these images. The reverse-correlation image of the sexual-harassment victim was rated as more gender prototypical than the image of the anti-sexual-harassment victim.

Finally, in studies examining participants' representations of sexual-harassment targets, participants read about a woman who experienced sexual harassment (e.g., unwanted romantic attention, exposure to pornography) or a woman who experienced control events and then chose which of several faces varying subtly in features more associated with femininity or masculinity best represented the woman (Goh et al., 2022, Studies A2–A4). Those who read about a sexually harassed woman chose more feminized faces.

Less research has explored whether women with intersectional identities are neglected in mental representations of sexual-harassment victims. However, in our studies, when participants read about targets of sexual harassment and targets of control events, they perceived the harassment targets as younger, which suggests that older women may be neglected in mental representations of sexual-harassment victims (Goh & Bandt-Law, 2020). Additionally, in another experiment, people were more likely to perceive White (vs. Black) women as targeted by sexual harassment (Bandt-Law et al., 2021), even when we controlled for social class and attractiveness. This pattern also endured after we ruled out a base-rates explanation, which eliminated the possibility that participants were more likely to perceive a White woman as a target because they relied on the greater proportion of White relative to Black women in the greater population distribution.

Do Prototypes of Women Shape Perceptions of Sexual Harassment and Its Consequences?

In this section, we outline how narrow prototypes of women bias third-party perceptions of sexual harassment, which holds interpersonal, organizational, and legal consequences for nonprototypical women who are sexually harassed. Although scholarship on third-party perceptions and consequences of sexual harassment has explored within-category variation in prototype fit

among White women who experience sexual harassment, little quantitative research has examined responses to the sexual harassment of women who possess devalued intersectional identities—a pattern of scientific neglect in urgent need of attention (Brassel et al., 2020). We therefore draw upon related literature on intersectionality and sexual assault. Because sexual assault is a type of sexual harassment (e.g., unwanted sexual contact), insights from this literature may advance scholarship on sexual harassment of women with devalued intersectional identities (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018).

Perceptions of sexual harassment

Path A in our model predicts that when women diverge from the prototype of women, people will less readily perceive potentially sexually harassing behaviors directed at them as sexual harassment. When we manipulated within-category prototype fit (e.g., variations in feminine vs. masculine traits; variations in facial features' prototypicality), we found that participants were less likely to label the same ambiguously harassing event as sexual harassment when the victim was less prototypical (Goh et al., 2022, Studies B1–B4). In other studies (Goh et al., 2022, Studies C1 and C2), people perceived harassment claims by women with less prototypical facial features and personality traits as less credible. Although attractiveness is part of the prototype of womanhood and can explain some of the overlap between prototypes of women and perceptions of sexual harassment, when we controlled for attractiveness, we still found that women who were more prototypical on other attributes (e.g., traits and hobbies) are more likely to be perceived as targets of sexual harassment (Goh et al., 2022, Study B2).

Similarly, intersectional-identity research reveals that people are less likely to label the same sexual assault perpetrated by a White man as such when it targets a Black rather than a White woman (George & Martínez, 2002). Also consistent with our theorizing are findings that women of color who report sexual assault are seen as less credible than White women who report sexual assault and also are blamed more by laypeople, police, and judges and juries (Coker et al., 2015; Epstein, 2020; Katz et al., 2017).

Consequences of perceptions of sexual harassment

Perceiving that sexual harassment occurred is central to interpersonal, organizational, and legal responses, and failure to perceive sexual harassment, by not recognizing it as harassment or by discrediting and blaming the victim, can prevent victims from accessing resources and justice (Epstein, 2020). Narrow gender prototypes

can prevent people from supporting nonprototypical victims of sexual harassment, as indicated by Path B in our model.

Bystander intervention is an important response to sexual harassment that can lessen the burden for targets, who may be retaliated against after speaking up themselves (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). Although there is limited research on interrupting sexual harassment, people may be less willing to interrupt harassment when it targets less prototypical women, as prototypical women are stereotyped as needing and deserving help and interrupting sexual harassment stems in part from paternalistic protection motives (Estevan-Reina et al., 2020; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Consistent with our model, a study examining intersectional identities found that participants reported less intent to intervene when a woman at risk for sexual assault was Black than when she was White (Katz et al., 2017).

Demonstrating that the victim incurred harm is required to meet the legal standard of harassment (U.S. EEOC, 2002). In two of our studies (Goh et al., 2022, Studies C1 and C2), people thought women who had nonprototypical features and traits were less upset, distressed, and traumatized by harassment than were more prototypical women. Likewise, laypeople, jurors, and police are more likely to discount the seriousness of sexual assault targeting Black, as opposed to White, women (Coker et al., 2015; Foley et al., 1995).

Support, accountability of the perpetrator, and justice are critical to victims' protection and recourse, and a victim's nonprototypicality can prevent access to these vital resources. In one of our studies (Goh et al., 2022, Study C1), participants assigned less severe punishments to perpetrators who harassed nonprototypical women than to those who harassed prototypical women. Similarly, other researchers have found that perpetrators who sexually assault overweight (vs. not overweight) and Black (vs. White) women are perceived as less deserving of punishment (Foley et al., 1995; Zidenberg et al., 2021). Additionally, Black, compared with White, assault victims are more likely to receive substandard care, discriminatory treatment, and secondary revictimization from medical practitioners and police officers (Coker et al., 2015; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010). This neglect can compound the psychological, physical, and economic harms caused by sexual violence.

The prototype paradox

Our model predicts that less prototypical women will encounter greater neglect as measured by a wide range of outcomes. The harassment they experience may not be perceived as such. The harm they suffer may be dismissed, bystanders may be less likely to intervene,

the perpetrators of their harassment may not be held accountable, and the victims may experience substandard care and revictimization when seeking justice. The paradox of these patterns of neglect is that less prototypical women are *more* likely to be targeted and harmed by sexual harassment. This pattern perpetuates and magnifies inequalities in who experiences sexual harassment and contributes to disparities in the workforce.

Conclusion

We have provided a model describing how the narrow prototype of women creates barriers to perceiving sexual harassment and negative consequences for women who do not resemble the prototype with respect to both within-category characteristics and the possession of devalued identities that intersect with gender. This neglect of nonprototypical women obstructs attempts to address sexual harassment, increase access to justice, and create more equitable workplaces that prevent harassment and support women. In addition to incorporating education about prototypes in workplace training, it is critical to expand the narrow prototype of women so that it more inclusively captures the many ways in which women enact gender and the wide variety of groups that intersect with the category "women." By recognizing that sexual harassment has a broad scope with respect to who is targeted, laypeople, organizations, and legal institutions will be better positioned to realize the potential of policies and laws intended to reduce and address sexual harassment.

Recommended Reading

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- Goh, J. X., Bandt-Law, B., Cheek, N. N., Sinclair, S., & Kaiser, C. R. (2022). (See References). Reports 11 experiments demonstrating how the narrow prototype of women affects perceptions and judgments of sexual-harassment targets.
- Purdie-Vaughns, V., & Eibach, R. P. (2008). (See References). Proposes a model in which, because of androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism, individuals with multiple subordinate-group identities are considered nonprototypical and are overlooked compared with prototypical group members.

Transparency

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ORCID iDs

Cheryl R. Kaiser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7847-042X>

Nathan N. Cheek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3515-4141>

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