



Witnessing workplace harassment and discrimination

Overcoming the 'social contagion' of toxic work culture

Original research on the witness experience, barriers to reporting, and how to help witnesses speak up when things go wrong.

A report by the Spot research team

Julia Shaw, PhD

Cofounder -
Head of Research

Research Associate -
University College London

Camilla Elphick, PhD

Research - Spot

Research Associate -
The Open University

Rashid Minhas, PhD

Research - Spot

Lecturer - University
of West London

CONTENTS

- 3 Executive Summary**
- 10 Brief Context**
- 13 Research Method**
- 17 Defining Witnesses**
 - 20 Finding 1:** Witnessing harassment & discrimination at work is a pressing issue
 - 22 Finding 2:** Most tell others when they witness workplace harassment, but they don't tell HR
 - 28 Finding 3:** Witnesses who tell others about the incident don't seek permission from the person who was the target of the harassment or discrimination
 - 31 Finding 4:** Witnesses are worried about the consequences of reporting, and some mirror reasons given by those who are directly harassed or discriminated against
 - 35 Finding 5:** Witnesses want better reporting options that allow for anonymity, and are online and automated
- 40 Conclusion & Recommendations**

Executive Summary



This study examines the experience of witnessing workplace harassment and discrimination, the barriers to reporting such behavior to human resources, and how organizations can improve reporting procedures.

The research involved a collaboration between Spot (talktopot.com), researchers from three UK universities, and various NGOs and nonprofits that provide support for individuals with protected characteristics.

Brief Context

Although there has been much awareness generated about the underreporting of workplace harassment and discrimination over the past decade, research has almost exclusively focused on victims. Similarly, public awareness has grown tremendously about harassment and discrimination, thanks in part to campaigns such as MeToo and TimesUp. However, the role of witnesses has remained largely unstudied and absent from public debate.

Research on witnesses is important for two main reasons. First, it's not just targets of harassment and discrimination who can suffer negative consequences; witnesses, too, can be affected negatively by seeing or knowing about such behavior in their workplaces. This can create a toxic culture for everyone who works in the organization. Second, witnesses have the potential to be helpful allies, and to alleviate some of the burden of reporting from people who experience harassment and discrimination.

This study was conducted because understanding the witness experience can help organizations create more effective processes to tackle harassment and discrimination at work, improve communication between employees and human resources, and build healthier workplaces.

Research Method

Dr. Julia Shaw, Dr. Camilla Elphick, and Dr. Rashid Minhas conducted this research as part of their work with Spot (talktospot.com). Ethical approval for conducting the study was granted by the Open University.

Participants were recruited for an interactive online survey through the research tool Positly, and through partnering with NGOs and nonprofits who provide support for individuals with protected characteristics:

1. **iHollaback** (<https://www.ihollaback.org>)
2. **Pregnant then Screwed** (<http://pregnantthenscrewed.com>)
3. **AllTogetherNow** (<https://alltogethernow.org.au>)
4. **Diversity Watch** (<http://diversitywatch.uk>)
5. **Women in the City** (<http://www.citywomen.co.uk>)

The survey was conducted four times between February 2019 and May 2019, each time with new participants. This included a version where all the questions were flipped and survey selections were randomized. This process makes the findings more reliable.

The final combined dataset from all four versions of the survey included **1096 participants**, predominantly from the US, but also some from the UK and Australia, of which 889 participants completed the entire survey.

The specific aims of the present research were i) to assess how many witnesses report the workplace harassment and discrimination they witness to their organization's leadership or HR, ii) to identify the barriers to reporting, and iii) to ask witnesses directly what they think organizations could do to improve the process.

MAIN FINDINGS

Finding 1: Witnessing harassment and discrimination at work is a pressing issue.

- 79% of participants witnessed an incident of harassment or discrimination within the past five years.
- This includes 42% who reported witnessing an incident within the past year.

The MeToo movement and related campaigns have raised awareness, but these results show that better mechanisms to effectively tackle the continued reality of workplace harassment and discrimination are still needed.

Finding 2: Most tell others when they witness workplace harassment, but they don't tell HR.

Most people who witnessed workplace harassment or discrimination told someone else about it, particularly family, friends, and colleagues.

- Most witnesses (67%) told someone outside of work about the incident, particularly family and friends.
- About half of witnesses (46%) told other people at work about the incident.

Despite feeling that the incident was worth telling others about, most witnesses didn't tell someone who could take action to deal with or prevent this kind of behavior.

- Most witnesses (77%) say that they never reported the incident to someone in HR.

This is likely to have a **social contagion effect**—people who are unhappy about the incident tell others, who then also become unhappy upon hearing about the harassment and discrimination that is happening at their company. It infects the company culture, and has the potential to continue spreading unless something is done to rectify the situation.

Finding 3: Witnesses who tell others about the incident don't seek permission from the person who was the target of the harassment or discrimination.

Of witnesses who told others at work or told HR, 78% did not seek permission from the person who was being harassed or discriminated against.

When witnesses tell others at work, but don't seek permission from the person who has been harassed or discriminated against, it creates three potential problems:

- Anonymity is jeopardized. This is particularly harmful to investigations.
- Trust may be further broken down. This can create major tensions in everyday work.
- Workplace culture can be damaged. This can lead to a culture of gossiping, secrecy, isolation, and helplessness among employees.

In order to be effective allies and protect the integrity of the reporting process, it is advised that witnesses always try to get permission before reporting the incident or sharing it with others.

Finding 4: Witnesses are worried about the consequences of reporting, and some mirror reasons given by those who are directly harassed or discriminated against.

The top five reasons given by witnesses for not reporting to HR were:

1. being worried about the consequences (34%)
2. not wanting to interfere (29%)
3. not knowing that witnesses could report (22%)
4. not wanting to be a snitch (18%)
5. not knowing how to report (16%)

Many participants chose more than one option, showing that there are often multiple reasons for witnesses not speaking up.

Mirroring barriers to reporting faced by direct targets of harassment and discrimination, 14% of witnesses were worried that their statements would not be believed. This is in addition to citing the same main reason targets cite for not reporting: fear of consequences and retaliation.

Those who witnessed the situation first hand were significantly more likely to be worried about the consequences of reporting, with 50% of those who were there citing it as a barrier, while only 21% of those who heard about the incident cited it as a barrier. Level of involvement in the situation, and perceptions of responsibility and blame, may therefore be related to how likely a witness is to report the event.

Finding 5: Witnesses want better reporting options that allow for anonymity, and are online and automated.

When asked about the reasons for not reporting to HR, many witnesses cited issues with the process itself.

- 16% of witnesses said they didn't know how to report
- 9% said that the reporting process is too complicated
- 5% said that they don't have time to report

A good reporting system should allow for easy and efficient reporting. This would break down one of the barriers to reporting.

Additionally, the single best way that witnesses say employers could improve witness reporting is by providing a system that allows witness anonymity. Witnesses also said that employers would be more likely to hear from them if they (i) had choices about where to report, (ii) actively encouraged witness reporting, (iii) had an automated witness reporting system, and (iv) made it easier to find out how to report.

In line with this, over 80% of witnesses said that allowing online reporting through an automated system was "important." The importance of this was also supported by results showing that witnesses who already had an online reporting tool available were significantly more likely (1.5x) to report the incident to HR.

Conclusion

This research provides evidence that employees continue to witness harassment and discrimination at work, and that they face many barriers to reporting it to their employer. Witnesses also have direct recommendations as to how the reporting process can be improved.

Major recommendations based on these results include:

1. Harness the knowledge of witnesses for understanding harassment and discrimination in the workplace.
2. Communicate internally that witnesses can report harassment and discrimination to HR, and educate them on the process for doing so.
3. Educate employees on how to be a good ally and on the problems, such as compromising anonymity, associated with not asking for permission before telling colleagues about an incident.
4. Provide an efficient, anonymous, online reporting option for reporting inappropriate workplace behavior.

Brief Context

If workplaces give people choices about who they want to report to, have a strong anti-harassment policy, and have an anonymous reporting tool in place, harassment and discrimination will reduce or disappear.

Bowes-Sperry and O’Leary-Kelly (2005)¹ found that those who witness harassment can be powerful forces in confronting and reducing it, but rarely do so (Good, Moss Racusin, & Sanchez, 2012)².

The experience of witnesses has been studied only infrequently, and has been conducted exclusively in conjunction with broader research on harassment and discrimination. Such studies show negative effects of witnessing harassment and discrimination, but are generally limited in scope and do not ask directly about barriers to reporting faced by witnesses.

For example, in a study on UK workers, of those who are people of color, 32% had witnessed or experienced workplace harassment in the past year (YouGov, 2016)³. As stated in their report, “No matter which data set we look at, the results clearly expose a concerning issue in many of the UK’s workplaces. The percentage of employees experiencing or witnessing racial harassment or bullying in the workplace is far too high, and needs immediate action.”

In another study that included questions about witnessing, Ragins and colleagues (2017)⁴ demonstrated that merely witnessing or being aware of racial discrimination at work lowered commitment to the organization and increased stress and absenteeism.

1 Bowes-Sperry, L., & O’Leary-Kelly, A. M. (2005). To act or not to act: The dilemma faced by sexual harassment observers. *Academy of Management Review*, 30(2), 288-306.

2 Good, J. J., Moss-Racusin, C. A., & Sanchez, D. T. (2012). When do we confront? Perceptions of costs and benefits predict confronting discrimination on behalf of the self and others. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 36(2), 210-226.

3 https://race.bitc.org.uk/system/files/research/race_equality_campaign_yougov_report_nov_2015_vfinal_e.pdf

4 Ragins, B. R., Ehrhardt, K., Lyness, K. S., Murphy, D. D., & Capman, J. F. (2017). Anchoring relationships at work: High quality mentors and other supportive work relationships as buffers to ambient racial discrimination. *Personnel Psychology*, 70(1), 211-256.

The inaction often demonstrated by witnesses can be understood in the context of the wider bystander literature (e.g. Ashburn-Nardo, 2014)⁵, which proposes that perceived responsibility, perceived costs, and reporting options all influence witnesses' decisions to report harassment. According to Buchanan and colleagues (2014)⁶, if workplaces give people choices about who they want to report to, have a strong anti-harassment policy, and have an anonymous reporting tool in place, harassment and discrimination will reduce or disappear.

How do we mobilize witnesses to be part of that solution? Research has shown that training can help to encourage witness reporting, as it ensures that everyone knows the policies and procedures, and can help employees feel empowered (EEOC, 2016)⁷. Lonsway, Cortina, and Magley (2008)⁸ found that training increases the likelihood that a complainant or witness will report, reduces victim-blaming, and reduces the likelihood of negative consequences associated with reporting. Not only does training benefit complainants and witnesses (Ragins et al., 2017), but it also benefits organizations by reducing the likelihood of legal redress (Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008)⁹ and provides an opportunity to address harassment and build healthier workplaces.

The present research provides a more direct investigation of witnessing workplace harassment and discrimination, and investigates the barriers to reporting. It also allows us to see a current snapshot of the witness experience, following recent public press coverage and debates about harassment in the workplace.

5 Ashburn Nardo, L., Blanchar, J. C., Petersson, J., Morris, K. A., & Goodwin, S. A. (2014). Do you say something when it's your boss? The role of perpetrator power in prejudice confrontation. *Journal of Social Issues*, 70(4), 615-636.

6 Buchanan, N. T., Settles, I. H., Hall, A. T., & O'Connor, R. C. (2014). A review of organizational strategies for reducing sexual harassment: Insights from the US military. *Journal of Social Issues*, 70(4), 687-702.

7 https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/report.cfm

8 Lonsway, K. A., Cortina, L. M., & Magley, V. J. (2008). Sexual harassment mythology: Definition, conceptualization, and measurement. *Sex roles*, 58(9-10), 599-615.

9 Buchanan, N. T., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (2008). Effects of racial and sexual harassment on work and the psychological well-being of African American women. *Journal of occupational health psychology*, 13(2), 137.

Research Method

Four-phase survey of the witness experience

A survey about witnessing workplace harassment or discrimination was conducted four times between February 2019 and May 2019, each time with new participants. This included a version where some of the questions were flipped—this was done to make sure that how the questions were asked was not leading participants to respond in a certain way. This process enhances the validity of the findings.

The three main aims of our research were i) to assess how many witnesses report witnessing workplace harassment and discrimination to their organization's leadership or to HR, ii) to identify the barriers to reporting, and iii) to examine the health consequences for witnesses.

Participants

Participants were recruited for an interactive online survey through the research tool Positly, and through partnering with relevant NGOs and nonprofits that provide support for individuals with protected characteristics:

1. **iHollaback** (<https://www.ihollaback.org>)
2. **Pregnant then Screwed** (<http://pregnantthenscrewed.com>)
3. **AllTogetherNow** (<https://alltogethernow.org.au>)
4. **Diversity Watch** (<http://diversitywatch.uk>)
5. **Women in the City** (<http://www.citywomen.co.uk>)

All participants completed the survey between 8 February 2019 and 5 May 2019.

Participants were broken down as follows:

1. Pilot: 50 participants consented. These were recruited via social media in liaison with NGOs and nonprofits (mainly UK & Australia).
2. Main study: 662 participants consented. These were recruited via Positly (US, paid \$1.20 for their time).
3. Flipped pilot: 47 participants consented. These were recruited via social media in liaison with NGOs and nonprofits (7) and Positly (40).
4. Flipped main study: 377 participants consented. These were recruited via Positly (US, paid \$1.20 for their time).

972 people who said they had witnessed harassment or discrimination at work were included in the final sample, of which 889 participants completed the entire survey.

Informed Consent

Participants received the following consent form before completing this study.

Witnessing workplace harassment and discrimination: An online survey

Why is this research being conducted?

We would like to invite you to take part in a survey to understand the experience of witnessing workplace harassment and discrimination. We will use your responses to help organizations understand and tackle barriers to reporting, and create safer workplaces.

Should I take part in this research?

This survey is intended for people who have directly witnessed or know of harassment and/or discrimination in their own workplace.

What happens if I participate?

You will be asked to complete a short online survey. The survey has been designed to take between 2 to 10 minutes. You will be asked to answer up to 20 questions. At no point will you be asked to provide information that reveals who you are - the survey is completely anonymous.

After completing the short survey, you will be thanked for your participation and shown additional resources that you can use for free if you ever want to report workplace harassment and discrimination.

What happens with my responses?

All your responses will be collected online. Your responses (your “data”) will then be downloaded and stored on the private, password-protected, computers of the researchers associated with this project for up to 5 years.

Data will not contain any information that can identify who you are. IP addresses will be removed by enabling Anonymize Responses in the survey options. Additionally, your data (which contains no identifying information) will be made publicly available to other researchers, in an effort to contribute to open science practices.

Because your responses are anonymous, we cannot remove your responses from our dataset once you have started to participate. If you would like to learn about the results of the study, we will make a public announcement on the Twitter account of Dr Camilla Elphick (@elphickcamilla) when these become available.

Are there any risks or consequences to participating?

You may find that this survey brings to mind uncomfortable events. Do not participate in this research if you think that this potential stress places you at risk. You can exit the survey at any time for any reason by simply closing the window. You can also use the online reporting tool (Spot) to document any events that come to mind, or contact Camilla Elphick if you wish to be directed to relevant NGOs for advice.

Who can I contact if I have questions?

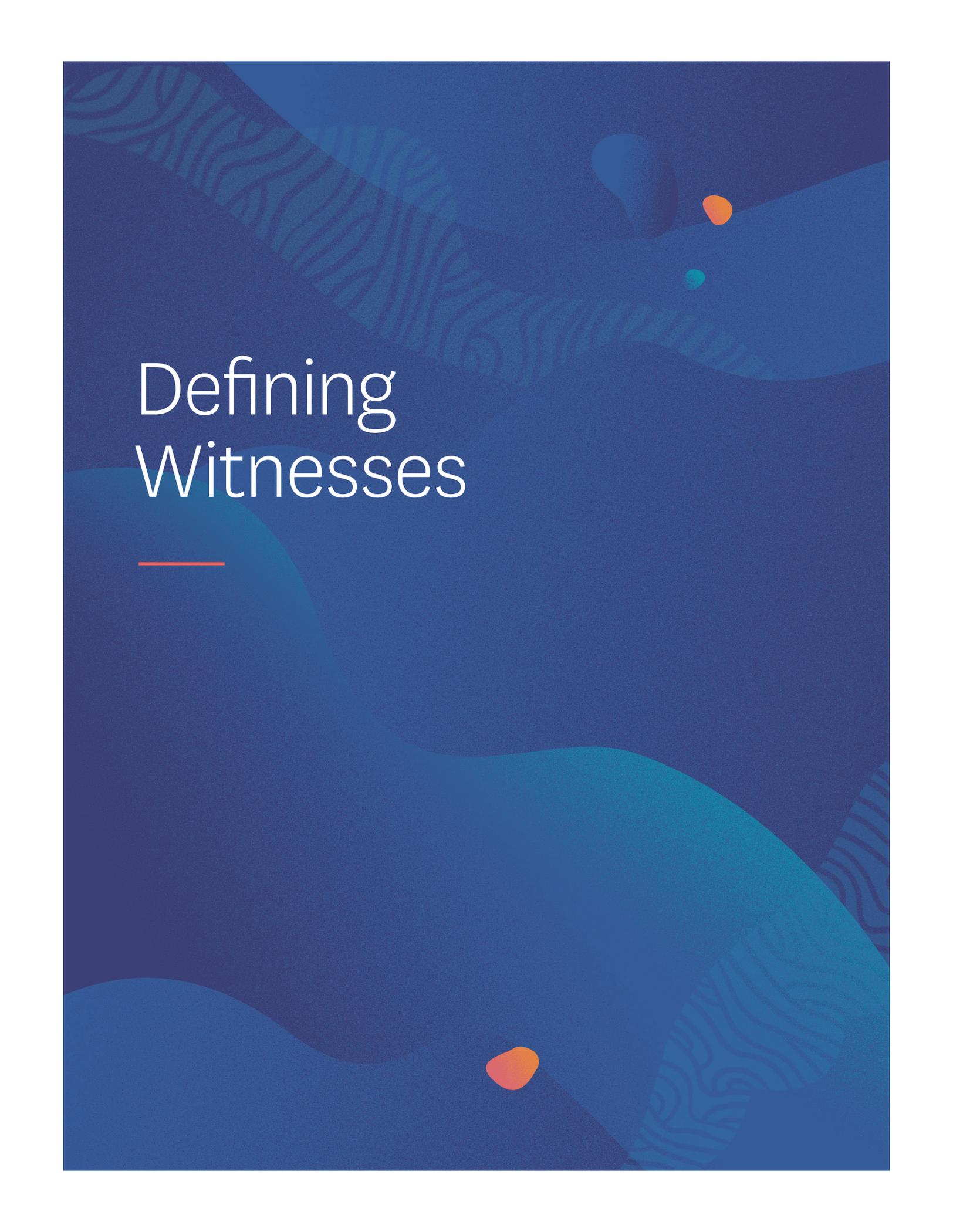
The primary investigator is Dr Camilla Elphick, a post-doctoral research associate in the School of Psychology at The Open University. If you have any questions or concerns about this research please contact her at: camilla.elphick@open.ac.uk

Alternatively, you can contact Dr Troy Cooper, the head of the school of psychology at The Open University at troy.cooper@open.ac.uk.

Data Storage

All data were collected online. All data are stored on the private, password-protected computers of the researchers associated with this project for up to five years. The latest destruction date of the data will be 6 February 2025. Data do not contain participants' identifying information, so no personal data was collected or stored. IP addresses were automatically removed by enabling "Anonymize Responses" in the survey options.

Note that a version of the cleaned database for sharing with researchers will become available when this study is accepted for publication in an academic journal.



Defining Witnesses

Who is a witness?

Harassment and discrimination are complex issues that are often poorly understood. Before participants were asked about their experiences witnessing harassment and discrimination, they were given an explanation of what these concepts are.

To help provide a framework for understanding these issues, participants were asked to read the following clarifications. This description and these examples are not universally considered harassment and discrimination, but they help to contextualize the kinds of things that can be considered as such:

We are interested in harassment or discrimination based on age, disability, gender reassignment, marital status, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation. Because the concept of harassment and discrimination is complex, we have provided some examples below:

Examples of harassment:

- You receive a dildo as a ‘secret Santa’ present.
- You have clinical depression and your manager makes a comment suggesting that depression isn’t a real thing—you’re just being lazy and need to ‘cheer up.’
- You receive an email chain letter sent around the office which portrays black people as having big penises.
- Your supervisor tells a homophobic or sexist joke, which offends you.

Examples of discrimination:

- Your employer doesn’t give you a promotion because you’re a woman and the manager thinks you’re likely to get pregnant soon.
- You apply for a job and don’t get it because the hiring manager doesn’t trust Muslims.
- You’re not invited out for work lunches because you’re gay and your colleague, who organizes the lunches, disapproves of your lifestyle.
- The workplace policy means that you have to work evenings, but you have a child.

This study is looking at **witnesses** of harassment or discrimination.

When we use the term **witness**, we mean someone who has seen, heard, or knows of another person being harassed or discriminated against.

When we use the term **victim**, we mean someone who has been the target of harassment or discrimination themselves.”

From this point on in this report, when the word “witness” is used, it refers to individuals who read the definitions provided to them, and subsequently said “yes” to the question, “Have you ever witnessed any incident(s) of harassment or discrimination in the workplace?”

Why are the participant numbers different for different questions?

Results in this report include data from different numbers of participants for different questions, as many questions did not apply to everyone, some participants chose not to answer some of the questions, and there was some participant attrition (drop-out) over the course of the study.



FINDING 1

79% of participants witnessed an incident of harassment or discrimination within the past five years.

1.1

Most reported witnessing an incident that happened in the past 5 years, with 42% witnessing an incident within the past year.

It would be understandable to think that, because of the media coverage of awareness campaigns and related controversies involving public figures, harassment and discrimination should have all but disappeared.

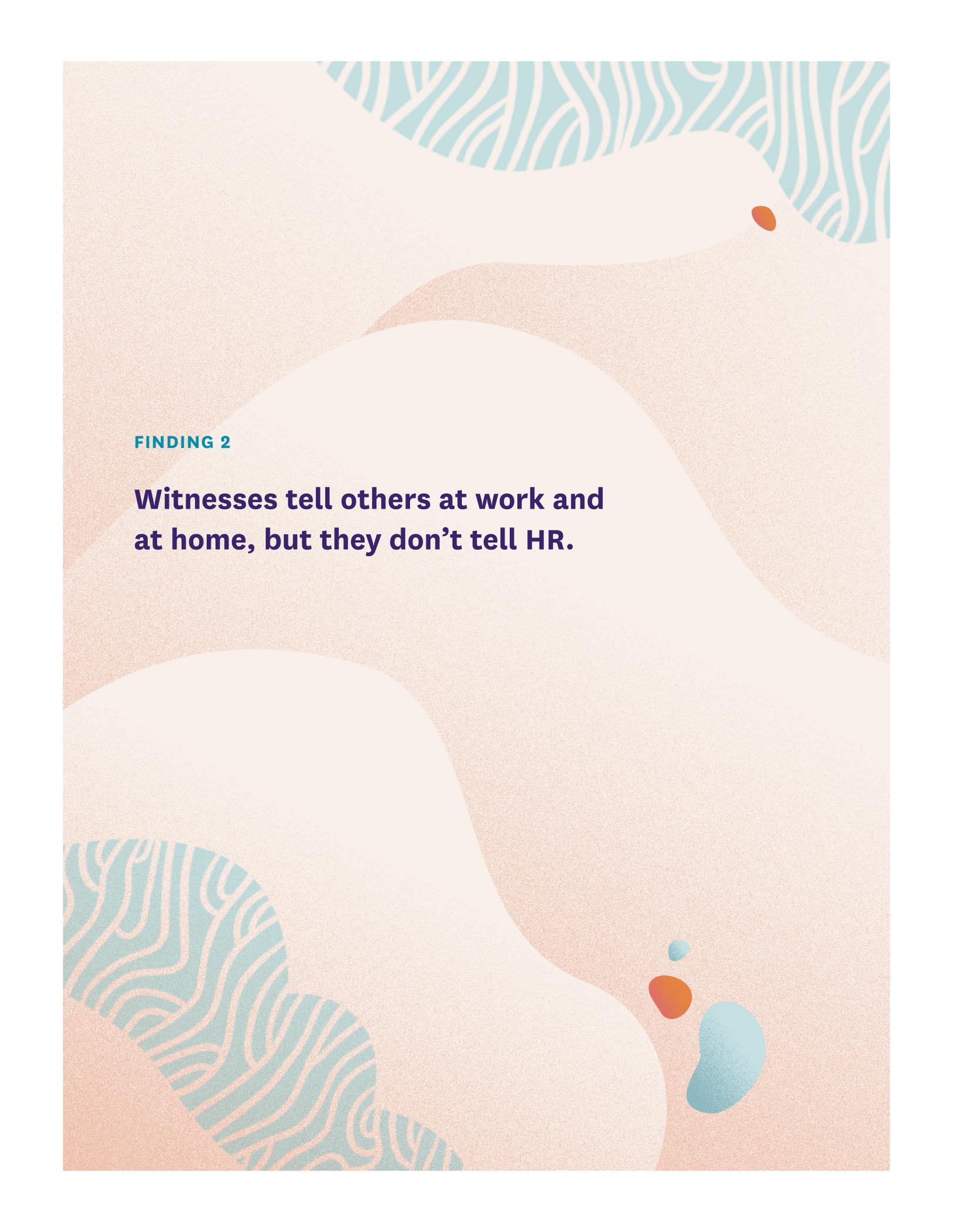
However, our research shows that witnesses say that such inappropriate workplace behavior continues to be a problem. When asked, “Roughly when did the incident occur?” 42% of participants reported witnessing an incident within the past year. Witnesses completed the survey between February and May 2019, and were referring to the one-year period before that.

Approximately 79% of participants stated that the incident(s) they had witnessed occurred within the past five years (those who stated “within the last year” + “last 5 years”), while for 21% they happened more than five years ago.

Roughly when did the incident occur?

STUDY PHASE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	LAST 12 MONTHS	LAST 5 YEARS	OVER 5 YEARS AGO
Pilot	51	40%	40%	20%
Main Study	662	42%	37%	21%
Flipped Pilot	47	45%	30%	21%
Flipped Main Study	212	40%	40%	20%
Overall	972	42%	37%	21%

This suggests that harassment and discrimination are still a pressing issue, and that more is required than awareness campaigns to make workplaces healthier. Mechanisms to more effectively deal with the continued reality of this problem are needed.



FINDING 2

Witnesses tell others at work and at home, but they don't tell HR.

2.1

Most witnesses (77%) did not report the incident to HR.

These figures for witness reporting are comparable to the data on victim reporting.

Research consistently shows that upwards of 70% (EEOC, 2016) of victims do not report workplace harassment and discrimination to their employer.

The results are also in line with research on reports submitted to talktospot.com, which found that 93% of witnesses did not report the incident(s) to their employer (go here for more information on the analysis conducted of Spot reports contributed for research:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyx6jx-6hd0>).

When witnesses were asked, “Did you make a formal report to the HR department?” most said “No.”

Did you report to HR?

STUDY PHASE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	YES	NO
Pilot	34	24%	76%
Main Study	530	23%	77%
Flipped Pilot	41	29%	71%
Flipped Main Study	294	23%	77%
Overall	899	23%	77%

2.2

About half of witnesses (46%) told other people at work about the incident.

In the first two versions of the survey (the pilot and main study), version one of this question was presented to participants: “Did you report to anyone else at work?” When we examined the open-ended responses provided by some participants at various points in addition to the survey questions, we refined the question to V2: “Did you tell anyone at work other than HR (e.g. your line manager or a colleague)?” The results changed slightly for this latter version, showing that clarification was helpful.

Did you report to anyone else at work?

STUDY PHASE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	YES	NO
Pilot	32	73%	27%
Main Study	521	48%	52%
Flipped Pilot	41	54%	46%
Flipped Main Study	285	39%	61%
Overall	879	46%	54%

This shows huge potential for what can be referred to as a “**social contagion**” effect (e.g., Christakis & Fowler, 2013)¹⁰ — that people who are unhappy about the incident tell others, who then also become unhappy upon hearing about the harassment and discrimination that is happening at their company. This infects the company culture, and has the potential to continue spreading unless something is done to rectify the situation.

Despite feeling that the incident is worth telling others about at work, most people don’t tell someone who can take action to deal with or prevent this kind of behavior. This shows that barriers need to be broken down to encourage reporting within the organization to those who can rectify the situation and restore a healthy workplace.

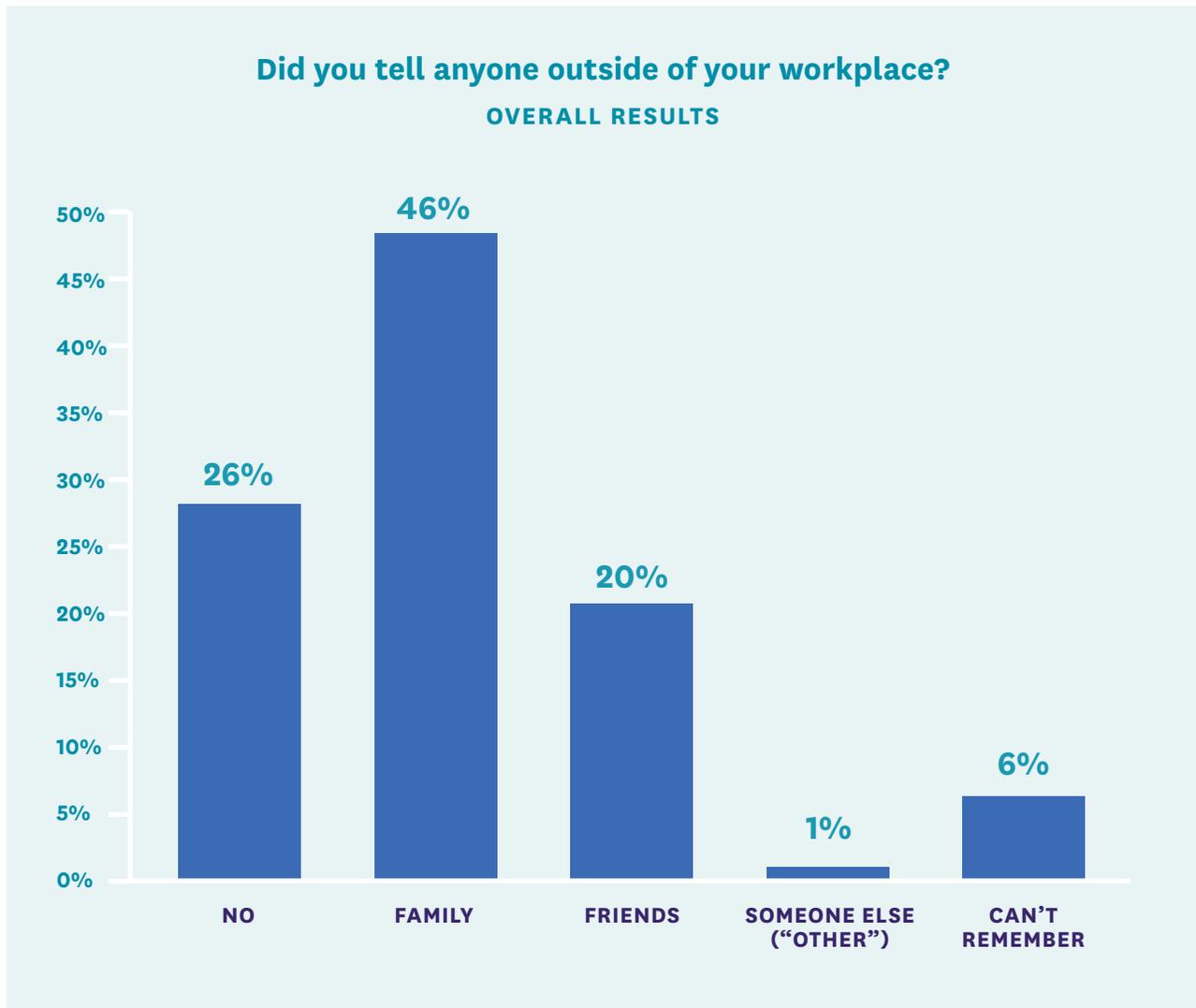
¹⁰ Christakis, N. A., & Fowler, J. H. (2013). Social contagion theory: examining dynamic social networks and human behavior. *Statistics in medicine*, 32(4), 556-577.

2.3

Most witnesses (67%) told someone outside of work about the incident, particularly family and friends.

Overall, combining the results of all four studies, we found that 67% of participants said they told others outside of work about the incident.

The question asked was, “Did you tell anyone outside your workplace?” Options included family, friends, experts, charities, and “don’t know.” No witnesses said they told charities about the incidents, so these data are omitted from this table. Only one person (in the flipped pilot version) said they told an expert—a lawyer—so this was included in “other.” Note that due to rounding to the nearest integer, the sum of all percentages may not add up to 100%.



Here is a more detailed breakdown of the results for all four phases of the study, showing that witnesses are particularly likely to tell family and friends about the incident.

Did you tell anyone outside your workplace?

STUDY PHASE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	NO	FAMILY	FRIENDS	SOMEONE ELSE (“OTHER”)	CAN’T REMEMBER
Pilot	29	14%	45%	28%	3%	10%
Main Study	430	23%	44%	21%	0%	7%
Flipped Pilot*	47	21%	23%	23%	8%	0%
Flipped Main Study	270	26%	52%	16%	1%	5%
Overall	776	26%	46%	20%	1%	6%

*There were missing data for this phase, so results do not add up to 100%.

2.4

Evidence of a social contagion effect

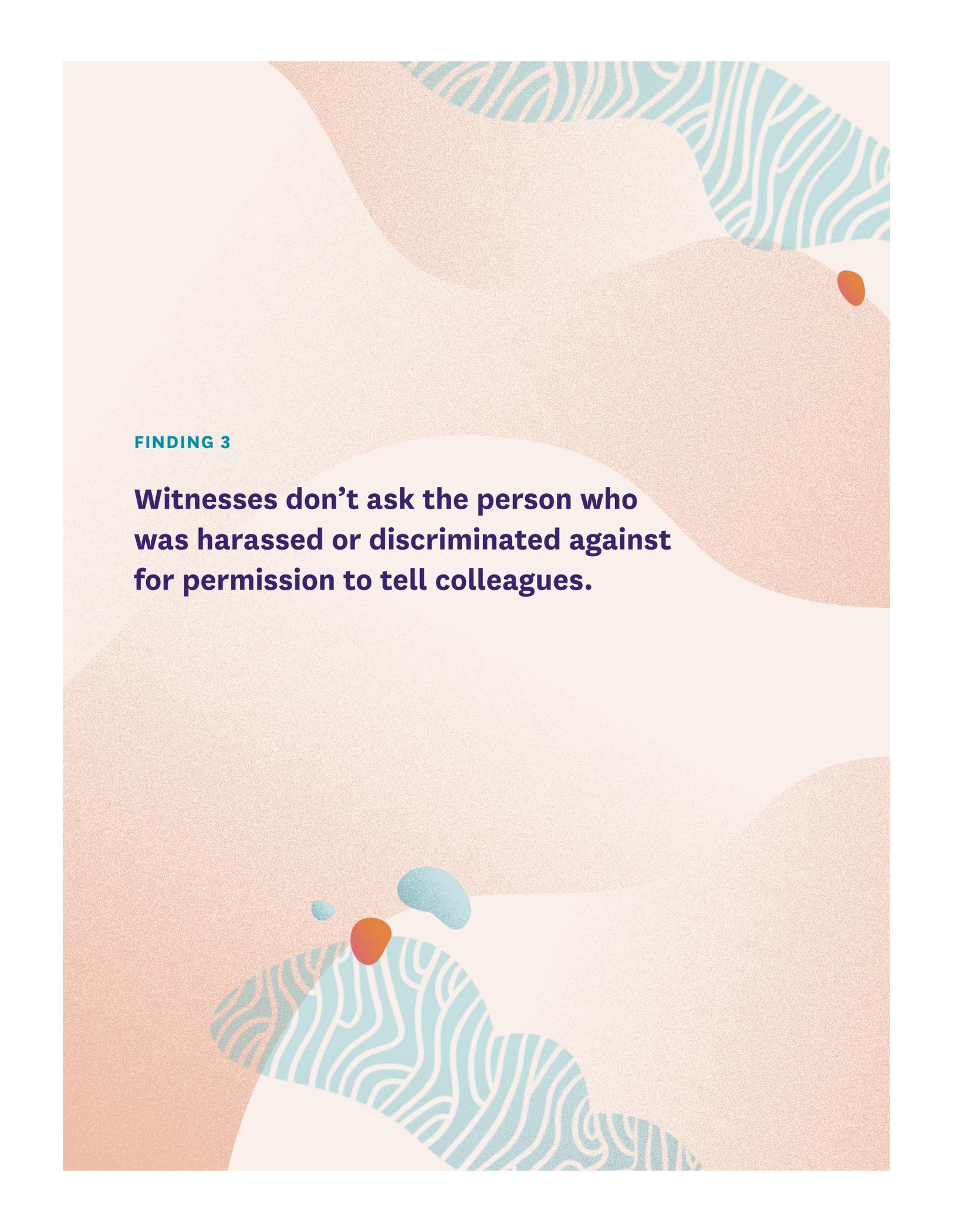
Despite feeling that the incident is worth telling others about, most people don't tell someone who can take action to deal with or prevent this kind of behavior. This research suggests there is likely to be a social contagion effect (Christakis & Fowler, 2013) when individuals witness harassment and discrimination at work. This means that people who witness an incident tell others, who then may further tell others.

This is the worst-case scenario, because it can lead to an overall toxic perception of the workplace without HR knowing that it is even happening. This is in line with previous research (e.g., Barsade, 2002)¹¹, which found a significant influence of emotional contagion on individual-level attitudes and groups processes.

Typically harassment and discrimination are perceived as negative events. It is likely that when someone witnesses such events, they become unhappy and make others unhappy when they tell them about it (Barsade 2002). This means that harassment and discrimination don't just affect those targeted by such behavior, but can infect the whole company culture, continuing to spread unless something is done to rectify the situation.



¹¹ Barsade, S. G. (2002). The ripple effect: Emotional contagion and its influence on group behavior. *Administrative science quarterly*, 47(4), 644-675.



FINDING 3

Witnesses don't ask the person who was harassed or discriminated against for permission to tell colleagues.

3.1

Of witnesses who told others at work or HR, 78% did not seek permission from the person who was being harassed or discriminated against.

Participants who said that they either reported the incident to HR or told other people in the workplace about it were asked, “Did you seek the victim’s permission to tell other people in the workplace?” The majority said that they did not seek permission.

STUDY PHASE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	DID NOT SEEK PERMISSION
Pilot (question not included)	-	-
Main Study	240	78%
Flipped Pilot	22	68%
Flipped Main Study	97	88%
Overall	359	78%

3.2

Witnesses who don't ask permission to talk about or report the incident may jeopardize anonymity, break down trust, and damage workplace culture.

When witnesses tell others at work but don't seek permission from the person who has been harassed or discriminated against, it creates three potential problems.

First, it jeopardizes anonymity.

Those who have experienced workplace harassment and discrimination often stress the importance of anonymous reporting¹². If colleagues or HR already know about the incident informally, anonymity may no longer be possible. Inability to stay anonymous is likely to inhibit formal reporting by the individuals who have been targeted, mostly due to a fear of retaliation and other negative consequences. This is harmful to investigations and to the organization's ability to take measures to prevent inappropriate workplace behavior.

Second, it can further break down trust.

Without permission, witnesses risk betraying the implicit trust that may exist between them and the person who has been harassed or discriminated against. This could lead to a working relationship that is tainted by a sense of betrayal or secrecy, adding to the psychological harm of the incident itself (e.g., Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998)¹³. Particularly if a witness and victim work closely together, a breakdown of trust could create major tensions in everyday work.

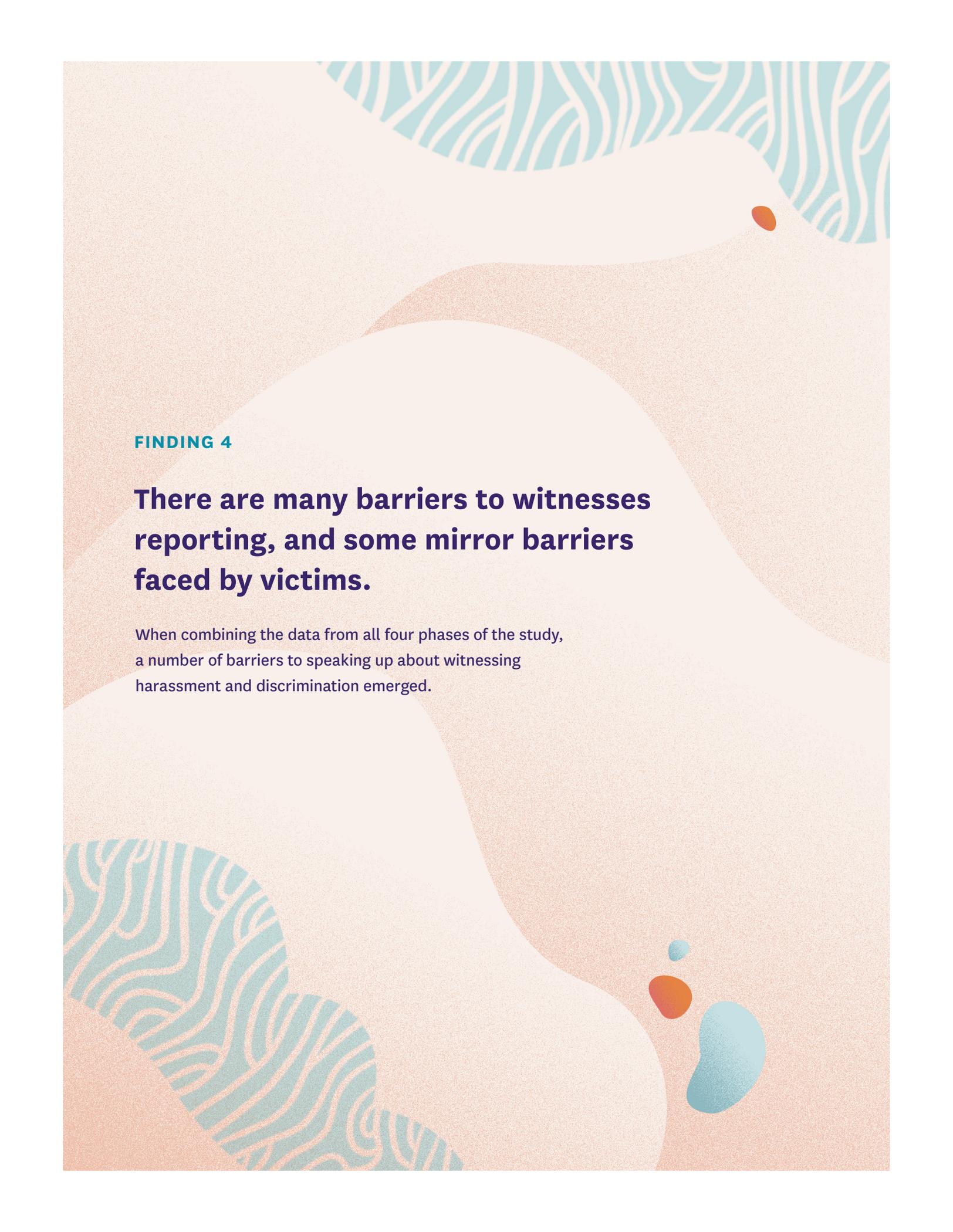
Third, it can damage the workplace culture.

Even if the victim doesn't find out that their incident has been shared with others without their permission, a culture of gossiping and secrecy among colleagues can lead to feelings of isolation and helplessness more widely, particularly if people feel that everyone knows about the harassment or discrimination but nothing has happened to rectify the situation.

In order to be effective allies and protect the integrity of the reporting process, it is advised that witnesses always try to get permission before reporting an incident or sharing it with others.

¹² EHRC (2018), retrieved 4th May, from <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/turning-tables-ending-sexual-harassment-work>

¹³ Elangovan, A. R., & Shapiro, D. L. (1998). Betrayal of trust in organizations. *Academy of management review*, 23(3), 547-566.



FINDING 4

There are many barriers to witnesses reporting, and some mirror barriers faced by victims.

When combining the data from all four phases of the study, a number of barriers to speaking up about witnessing harassment and discrimination emerged.

4.1

Witnesses didn't report to HR because they were worried about the consequences, didn't want to interfere, and didn't know they could report.

If participants indicated that they did not report the incident to HR, they were asked, "We would be interested to know why you did not tell HR." Many participants chose more than one option, showing that there are often multiple reasons for witnesses not speaking up.

Merging the data from all four phases of the study, and flipping and reorganizing all randomized response options, the top five reasons for witnesses NOT reporting to HR were (1) being worried about the consequences, (2) not wanting to interfere, (3) not knowing that witnesses could report, (4) not wanting to be a snitch, and (5) not knowing how to report.

STUDY PHASE:	PILOT	MAIN STUDY	FLIPPED STUDY	FLIPPED MAIN STUDY	OVERALL
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:	24	406	34	270	408
Responses by study phase:					
Because I was worried about the consequences	13%	40%	26%	56%	34%
Because I did not want to interfere	17%	37%	24%	37%	29%
Because I did not know that witnesses could report	25%	14%	15%	34%	22%
Because I did not want to be seen as a 'snitch'	4%	19%	29%	19%	18%
Because I did not know how to report	25%	17%	3%	18%	16%

4.2

Some witnesses (14%) were worried that their statements would not be believed.

Mirroring what we know from research on victims of harassment and discrimination at work, some individuals are worried that they will not be believed. Across the four studies, 14% of participants stated fear of not being believed as a reason why they never told HR.

STUDY PHASE:	PILOT	MAIN STUDY	FLIPPED STUDY	FLIPPED MAIN STUDY	OVERALL
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:	24	406	34	270	408

Responses by study phase:

Because I was worried I would not be believed	13%	15%	15%	15%	14%
---	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

4.3

Those who witnessed the incident first hand were more worried about the consequences of reporting.

Results show some differences in the barriers perceived by those who have just heard about an event and those who witnessed the event directly.

Across all four phases of the study, results show that while 27% of those who witnessed harassment or discrimination first hand reported the incident to HR, only 12% of those who heard about it did.

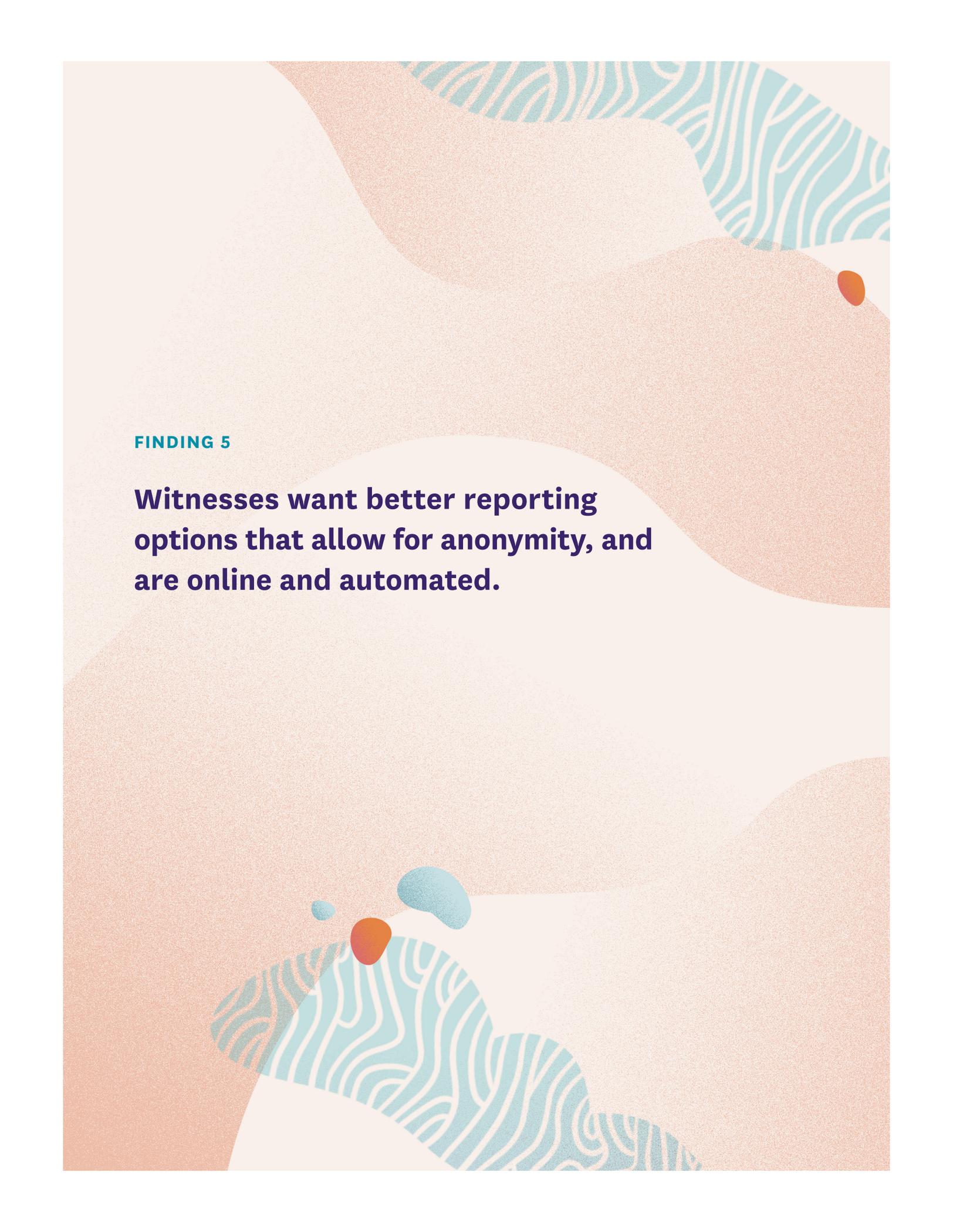
	I DIDN'T REPORT	I REPORTED
I heard about it	88%	12%
I saw it	73%	27%

While the barriers for both were similar, one of the main barriers to reporting for those who just heard about the incident was not wanting to interfere, while those who saw the event were far more worried about the consequences of reporting.

Please specify why you did not tell HR

	I HEARD ABOUT IT	I SAW IT
Because I did not want to interfere	40%	32%
Because I was worried about the consequences	21%	50%

This suggests that people who are present in a situation are more worried about negative effects on their career, perhaps because they feel more directly involved and thus worry they will be retaliated against.



FINDING 5

Witnesses want better reporting options that allow for anonymity, and are online and automated.

5.1

When asked about the reasons for not reporting to HR, 16% of participants stated that they did not know how to report, and 9% said that the reporting process is too complicated.

While these practical barriers are mentioned less often, a good reporting system should allow for easy and efficient reporting. This would break down one of the barriers to reporting.

STUDY PHASE:	PILOT	MAIN STUDY	FLIPPED STUDY	FLIPPED MAIN STUDY	OVERALL
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:	24	406	34	270	408

Responses by study phase:

Because the reporting process is too complicated	4%	10%	12%	10%	9%
Because I did not have time	4%	3%	9%	3%	5%
Because I did not know how to report	25%	17%	3%	18%	16%

5.2

The main way that witnesses say employers could improve witness reporting is by providing a system that allows witness anonymity.

When asked what workplaces could do better to encourage witness reporting, across all survey phases, witnesses most highly ranked (1) witness anonymity, (2) choices about where to report, (3) employers encouraging witness reporting, (4) having an automated witness reporting system, and (5) making it easier to find out how to report.

What could workplaces do better?



Note: Witnesses were able to choose more than one response, so these results add up to more than 100%.

5.3

Over 80% of witnesses said that allowing online reporting through an automated system was “important.”

In the final version of the survey, a question was included to directly ask about reporting options. This included asking participants what they think their organization could do to improve the reporting process. One option was to “allow witnesses to report via an online automated reporting system.”

- 80% of people who didn't report considered online automated reporting important
- 87% who did report to HR considered this important

Online systems are also more likely to allow for anonymous reporting, which could help improve multiple aspects of the reporting structure.

5.4

Witnesses who had an online reporting tool available were significantly more likely (1.5x) to report the incident to HR.

In the final version of the survey, a question was included to directly ask about whether their organization had an online reporting tool.

37% of those who reported to HR said their organization had an online reporting tool, while only 25% of those who did not report to HR said their organization had this in place.

- This is evidence that people who speak up benefit from having an automated online reporting tool, and that such tools can elicit 1.5 times more reports to HR.

This effect was **not** found for one of the other common options given to employees: reporting hotlines. 22% of those who didn't report said their HR already has hotlines, compared to 25% of those who did report.

Additionally most witnesses who didn't have automated online reporting at their workplace said that it would be a helpful tool to have.

- 77% of people who did not have automated online reporting in place state that they believe this would be "helpful."

Conclusion and Recommendations



Witnesses represent a huge and largely untapped resource in the fight against harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Witnesses can directly and immediately be allies for those targeted by harassment and discrimination, and can help employers learn about incidents that would otherwise go unreported. Engaging witnesses can help organizations take action sooner to restore the health of their workplace culture and prevent a social contagion effect of employee disillusionment and disengagement.

Employees who are educated on the role they might play in making workplaces safer are more likely to speak up when they witness inappropriate behavior. Based on the present results, organizations are encouraged to educate employees that speaking up is healthy, that they can help without “interfering,” and that they will not be seen as “snitches” when they report.

Educating witnesses on how to be good allies is crucial for creating a positive and supportive environment, rather than one that relies too heavily on monitoring or ‘policing’ one another. Witnesses should be taught to offer support to the person who has been harassed or discriminated against directly. In line with one of the findings presented in this report—that less than a quarter of witnesses ask the target of the inappropriate behavior for permission to talk about the incident with colleagues or HR—it is prudent to educate witnesses on the importance of gaining permission. This helps to protect victim anonymity, the integrity of the reporting process, and the psychological wellbeing of all those involved.

Findings presented in this report also indicate that there appears to be a lack of trust by witnesses in the reporting process itself and a major deficit in understanding how to report harassment and discrimination. This represents a major opportunity. Combined with giving witnesses more effective and efficient reporting pathways, organizations are encouraged to minimize potential for retaliation and other negative consequences. One way to achieve this is to provide anonymous, online reporting tools.

Based on this research and ample previous research on barriers to reporting by those who themselves have been harassed or discriminated against, anonymity should be an option for all involved in an incident, including witnesses. While this level of anonymity will necessarily limit the scope of some investigations, it is also the most likely pathway to finding out about inappropriate behavior. Better data about what’s happening within the organization helps HR work more proactively to build and protect diverse teams.

Mobilizing witnesses of harassment and discrimination represents an important step towards overcoming the social contagion effect and creating safer, more inclusive workplaces.