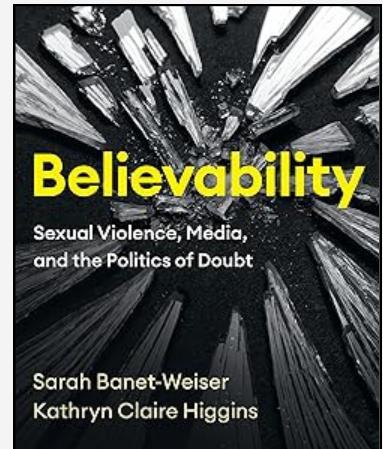


# BELIEVABILITY, POWER, AND HARASSMENT

ISSUE 44 | JANUARY 2026

In conversations around sexual harassment, one question quietly shapes outcomes more than most others: Who is believed?

This edition focuses on believability as a social and institutional process shaped by power, norms, and structures. Understanding how believability works helps us move toward fairer, safer, and more accountable environments.



## Why Believability Matters

In discussions of sexual harassment, attention is often placed on facts, evidence, and procedure. While these are crucial, they do not fully explain how complaints are received, evaluated, or dismissed in practice. What frequently shapes outcomes (often invisibly) is believability.

*In Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt* (2023), Kathryn Claire Higgins and Sarah Banet-Weiser argue that we must shift our analytic frame from truth to believability. Rather than treating sexual violence as something adjudicated only through objective facts, evidence, or legal testimony, they show that claims are made, circulated, and judged within media and cultural contexts. As they argue, believability is not neutral or evenly distributed; it is socially produced.

Higgins and Banet-Weiser conceptualize believability as an economy; a form of cultural capital that some people possess automatically, while others must work extraordinarily hard to access.

In cases of sexual harassment, believability determines whether a complaint is heard as plausible or doubtful, credible or exaggerated, worthy of action or quiet dismissal. It shapes whose harm is recognized and whose is minimized, often long before any formal inquiry begins.

Complainants, particularly women and people from marginalized social locations, are often expected to demonstrate credibility through:

- Perfect consistency in their accounts
- The “right” emotional expression
- Immediate reporting
- Corroboration that is often difficult or impossible to produce

Even small gaps, uncertainties, or ambiguities can be used to cast doubt on their accounts. In contrast, those with institutional authority, professional reputation, or social power often benefit from presumed credibility, where doubt works in their favor.

In the Indian context, believability is shaped not only by gender and institutional hierarchy, but also by caste, religion, ethnicity, region, language, and class.

Certain groups are historically positioned as less trustworthy, less respectable, or more easily discredited. Survivors from marginalized caste locations, religious minorities, Adivasi communities, migrant backgrounds, or non-dominant linguistic groups may face heightened skepticism when they report sexual harassment. Their complaints are more likely to be questioned, delayed, or reframed as misunderstandings or false accusations.

Caste, in particular, plays a powerful role in structuring believability. Upper-caste respectability often translates into assumed credibility, while Dalit and Bahujan complainants may be required to produce excessive proof, consistency, and restraint to be taken seriously.

Higgins and Banet-Weiser show that believability operates along two overlapping dimensions: subjectivity and performance.

Subjectivity refers to who is seen as capable of being believed, and it is shaped by one’s position within existing power relations, including gender, race, caste, class, and institutional status. Performance refers to the labor required to appear convincing, including how one narrates harm, displays emotion, provides proof, and sustains credibility over time.

Marginalised individuals begin from a position of disadvantage within this economy. Historically positioned as unreliable or untrustworthy, they are often required to perform believability repeatedly and convincingly, with little margin for error.

## **What Can We Do as a Community?**

Creating a culture of believability does not mean abandoning due process. It means:

- Taking every complaint seriously
- Avoiding assumptions about intent or character
- Recognizing power asymmetries
- Centering harm alongside procedural fairness

Everyone plays a role in shaping a culture of believability:

- Listen without interruption or judgment
- Avoid informal investigations or speculation
- Use survivor-centered and respectful language
- Maintain confidentiality
- Challenge casual dismissal, jokes, or minimization of harassment

The monthly newsletter from the Committee for Managing Gender Issues (CMGI) is an attempt to initiate conversations on sexual harassment. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Geetika Sharma at [geetikas@iima.ac.in](mailto:geetikas@iima.ac.in) for queries, submissions, and/or feedback.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment on campus, please reach out to us at: Email: [chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in](mailto:chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in). Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.

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