



## Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault

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### Why Victims Recant

Proponents of the misconception that sexual assault allegations are often fabricated simply for petty revenge or guilt often hang their hat on the fact that victims recant their story. Unfortunately, without the understanding or personal experience of the devastating trauma of sexual assault, this may seem like an easy argument to fall for. So if not out of guilt for their deviant falsehoods, why would a victim of sexual violence recant? There are multiple reasons why someone who has been through sexual violation, may attempt to take him/herself out of the criminal justice process. They include the following:

1. Victims of both sexual and domestic violence face the reality of being the prosecutions entire case against someone who is a member of their family or an intimate partner. Underlying the violence is the truth that this person is someone you deeply love or loved, who you feel responsible for protecting, and whom you may depend on for basic needs. Victims often recant with the misguided understanding that he/she can “drop” the case and just move on without the additional trauma of being the one to send their father, husband, boyfriend, or aunt to prison.
2. Inter-familial and intimate partner violence often entails a process of grooming, emotional abuse, and psychological mind games. By the time a case enters the criminal justice system, the victim has faced a barrage of threats, oppression, dominance, and of course violence. Victims may have faced years of being told they aren’t worth a piece of garbage. Additionally, abusers often threaten death or suicide or psychological ruin. These threats are not idle, as we see them played out in our communities all the time.
3. The trauma of sexual violence is dramatic. Suicide, self-mutilation, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and a number of other serious impacts are not uncommon. Victims are in the thick of this trauma at the time that the criminal justice system is asking them to be their entire case against the abuser. Some victims physically, emotionally and psychologically cannot face the reality of

sitting on the stand and discussing in detail what was done to their vagina in front of a room full of strangers. Also, a typical defense strategy is to discredit the victim by calling her promiscuous or unstable. Essentially, blaming the victim for the attack. The courage it takes to face such degradation, even in the name of justice, is incredible.

4. The social response to sexual violence is often marked by a tendency to blame the victim. We often work unbelievably hard to find any reason for why this happened. "What did she do to deserve this?" By making these doubts part of our cultural sentiment we leave many victims asking themselves the same question. Such doubt in the mind of a victim can undermine her ability to face the process.

The reality is that any victim is likely to be facing, not one of these hurdles, but all of them. We set victims up for a loose-loose situation. If they continue through the system they face an intensification of their trauma, public stigma and threats. If they do not continue through the system they are branded as liars and cowards and may be returning to their life of abuse.

This above picture presents a daunting reality for victims. Creating a system and a culture where victims see their offender held accountable without fear of additional trauma and suffering will take a commitment from all of us. The criminal justice system must find ways to prosecute cases of inter-familial and intimate partner violence without depending on the victim. The public must create communities of support and compassion that can help victims find the courage to make their way through the criminal justice process. We all must drop our assumptions and stereotypes of sexual violence victims. FBI statistics indicate that only 2% of sexual assault reports are false and no more prevalent than false reports of other crimes. A recanting victim is not an indication of a false report, simply a human being struggling to move on with life in the face of intense trauma and personal humiliation about to played out in the public theater.