

# Sexual harassment scandals have been rocking the tech industry – but we've seen this all before



- [Julie Bort](#)
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Former Uber CEO Travis KalanickSteve Jennings/Getty Images

The floodgates of Silicon Valley have opened as more women are sharing stories about the sexual harassment, discrimination and sexism they experience.

They are naming their harassers' names and their stories are having a huge impact.

Instead of attempting to sweep things under the rug, companies are investigating these complaints and the men involved are publicly apologizing, resigning, getting fired, and being asked to leave professional organizations.

It's a rock-and-hard-place situation for the tech industry. Silicon Valley prides itself as being progressive, open and supportive to all, especially the most marginalized people.

On the other hand, tech is an exceptionally male world that glorifies a frat-boy lifestyle, where offices are filled with booze and "[brilliant jerks](#)" tend to be the rule, not the exception.

Women are feeling hopeful that this time, a new crop of women speaking out will really shift things. On the other hand, they are not yet convinced. Women have been speaking out about sexual harassment for years. Here is a rundown of the current sexual harassment scandals rocking Silicon Valley, along with the long history of how the tech industry got here.

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**It feels as though every day, another big name in tech is being fired over sexual harassment — or at least publicly apologizing for it after an accuser speaks out.**



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Last week, Kris Duggan [resigned as CEO of HR startup BetterWorks](#) following accusations of sexual assault and harassment. Duggan was a known name in the startup world. He had previously cofounded Badgeville.



[SaaStr/YouTube](#)

Earlier in July, [a number of high-profile VCs resigned](#) after women came forward with complaints of sexual harassment.



[Flickr/Andrew Malone](#)

One of those VCs was Justin Caldbeck, who resigned from the fund he founded, Binary Capital, after a group of women shared some stunning accusations. Investors in the fund [threatened to pull out](#).



Justin Caldbeck [YouTube/straylor](#)

**Dave McClure, founder and general partner at seed investment group 500 Startups, [resigned after a female founder spoke up](#) about interactions with him. He wrote a public apology saying, ['I'm a Creep. I'm Sorry.'](#)**



[Getty Images](#)

**Several male startup CEOs we talked to last week told us they called their investors and demanded to know if any of them had ever been accused of this type of misconduct. They fear the names of their startups could be dragged through the mud if women step forward and accuse one of their board members.**



Feng Li / Staff / Getty Images

**This 2017 outpouring of sexual harassment accusations was inspired by a blog post in February by Susan Fowler, an engineer and author who [alleged that she had experienced sexual harassment](#) during her one-year stint at Uber, and that Uber's HR had dismissed her complaints.**



Anindito Mukherjee/Reuters

Shortly after that post, Amit Singhal, a famed Google engineer hired by Uber, was asked to resign when Uber discovered he did not disclose allegations of harassment at Google.



Uber

**But Uber's public meltdown was hardly the beginning. Women in tech have been talking about the situation for years, everything from tweets of frustration, to specific allegations, to lawsuits, to academic research.**



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Back in 2008, the Harvard Business Review published a report called "[The Athena Factor](#)" on why women were leaving science, engineering and tech careers. It concluded that "hostile macho cultures" were to blame. "Women in SET are marginalized by lab coat, hard hat, and geek workplace cultures that are often exclusionary and predatory (fully 63% experienced sexual harassment)," it said.



Oli Scarff/Getty Images

**A decade ago, women who spoke out about perceived sexism were often vilified, especially if it caused a man to lose his job.**



[Flickr/Savara \(deprecated\)](#)

**In 2012, VC Ellen Pao famously sued Kleiner Perkins alleging sexual discrimination, not harassment. But in the trial, she alleged that one of her coworkers tried to retaliate after she ended an affair with him. She ultimately lost the case. That partner, Ajit Nazre, left the job and was accused of sexual harassment by another female VC at the firm.**



Josh Edelson/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Back in 2013, the infamous "dongle-gate" scandal happened, when [Adria Richards](#) [was fired from her job](#) at startup SendGrid after she complained about sexist comments she overheard at a trade show. The man she complained about got fired. Angry supporters of him launched a denial-of-service attack on SendGrid in revenge and Richards was fired.



[Flickr/danlockton](#)

**Another uproar happened in 2014, when a prominent engineer at GitHub sparked the same debate after she publicly quit amid allegations of sexual harassment from a coworker. The company never admitted such harassment took place, but founder-CEO Tom Preston-Werner ultimately resigned.**



GitHub founder-CEO Tom Preston Werner Business Insider

**In 2014, Gamergate exploded into the tech scene when female game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu and video game critic Anita Sarkeesian were targeted by an angry online mob. They endured harassment including public exposure of personal information, rape threats, and death threats.**



Feminist Frequency's Anita Sarkeesian  
Feminist Frequency

In 2015, a female Google engineer publicly accused two male engineering directors of sexually harassing her on two different occasions and said she got no help from HR. Neither of those top managers were Uber's Singhal, by the way.



Justin Sullivan/Getty

**That same year, Tinder co-founder Whitney Wolfe sued the company alleging sexual harassment, too, and shared texts as evidence. She eventually settled the suit, and has gone on to found her own dating app, Bumble. After the suit, CEO Sean Rad was pushed out of the job only to return six months later, and eventually become chairman.**



Whitney Wolfe

By 2016, the women-in-tech situation seemed to be relegated to a lot of talk, no action. Every tech conference had a discussion panel about it. Yet, [a survey of 200+ women published that year](#) found 90% witnessed sexist behavior and 60% reported being sexually harassed at work, often by their bosses.



Mike Nudelman/Business Insider

**[A recent study by law firm Carlton Fields Jordan Burt](#) implies that tech companies themselves have sowed the conditions for harassment by discouraging women to speak up. This study found that companies routinely ask workers to waive their rights to sue about employment issues, including harassment, in favor of hush-hush private arbitration. Tech companies are also fond of including non-disparagement clauses in their employment contracts, leading employees to believe they are legally bound not to file complaints or go to the press.**



[Elizabeth Welsh / Flickr, CC](#)

Meanwhile, [the Labor Department is currently suing Google](#) over its refusal to provide data that proves it pays women and men equally. Employees have apparently told the government that they weren't sure if they'd face retribution or get fired if they reported information to the government. (Google insists that employees are free to discuss labor conditions with the DoL.)



Google employees form a Google "G."Google

These days, some women have learned to avoid legal hush clauses. For instance, well-known programmer Coraline Ada Ehmke [recently turned down a severance check from GitHub](#), which required signing a non-disparagement clause, because she wanted to speak out about her frustrating experience working there. She didn't allege sexual harassment but did accuse the company of not really fixing its 'toxic' culture after the public blow-up in 2014.



Coraline Ada Ehmke refused to take a severance check from GitHub so she could speak out about her awful year there. Coraline Ada Ehmke

**Other women are going further and filing lawsuits. For instance, in February, a female engineer at Tesla filed a suit that alleged sexual harassment and discrimination. In June, Tesla fired her. After that, other Tesla female employees reportedly openly discussed harassment at a town hall as well.**



Reuters/Bobby Yip; Business Insider/Dave Smith

**Women tell Business Insider that they still fear retaliation if they talk about incidents of harassment. The Valley's frat-boy culture is deeply baked in.**



Yik Yak YouTube

For instance, after virtual reality startup UploadVR was sued for sexual harassment in May, a male startup CEO publicly commented that lawsuits like this make him "VERY afraid to hire more [women]. It just seems like such a huge risk as CEO." His comments went viral and he later retracted, apologized and deleted them.



UploadVR founders UploadVR

When Dave McClure and, separately, VC Chris Sacca came forward after being publicly accused of sexual harassment, many praised them for confessing and didn't condemn the actions that caused them to confess.



Chris Sacca of Lowercase Capital.Getty

**Even so, there are some signs that suggest the Valley is genuinely growing up and past its frat roots, such as Reid Hoffman's #DecencyPledge [calling for all VCs to have zero tolerance for sexually predatory behavior.](#)**



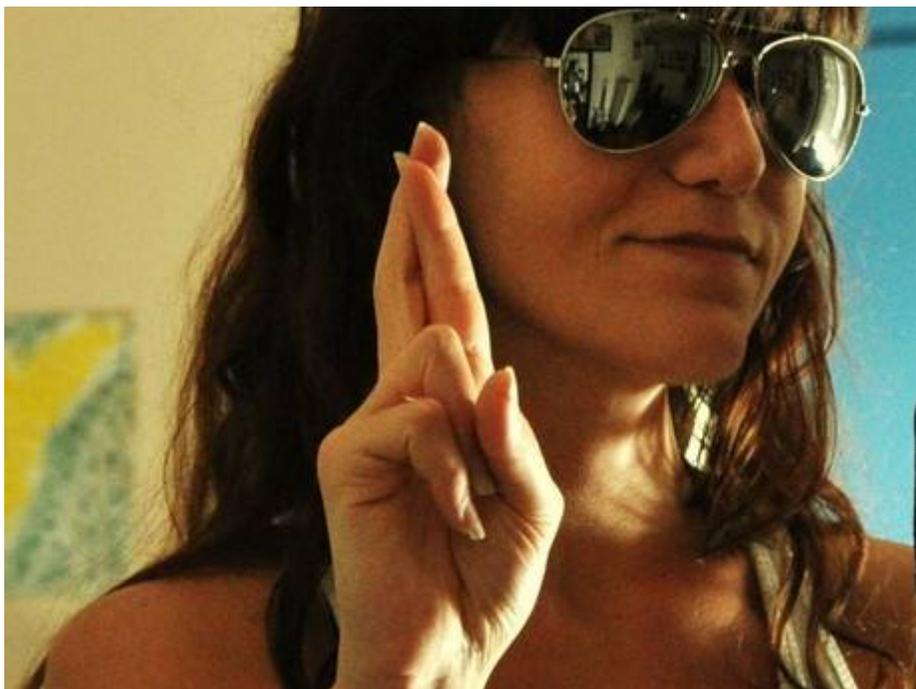
LinkedIn chairman Reid HoffmanSteve Jennings/Getty Images

Another sign that things are changing happened in March, when a male programmer accused of harassing a female developer [was rejected from an important Google-led professional organization](#), the Kubernetes Community. The thing is, his alleged harassment of another group member had taken place outside of the group, before he even joined. The two had previously worked at the same company. When the drama was dragged into this professional org, its leader, Sarah Novotny, investigated the accusations and sided with the woman, asking the guy not to join the group.



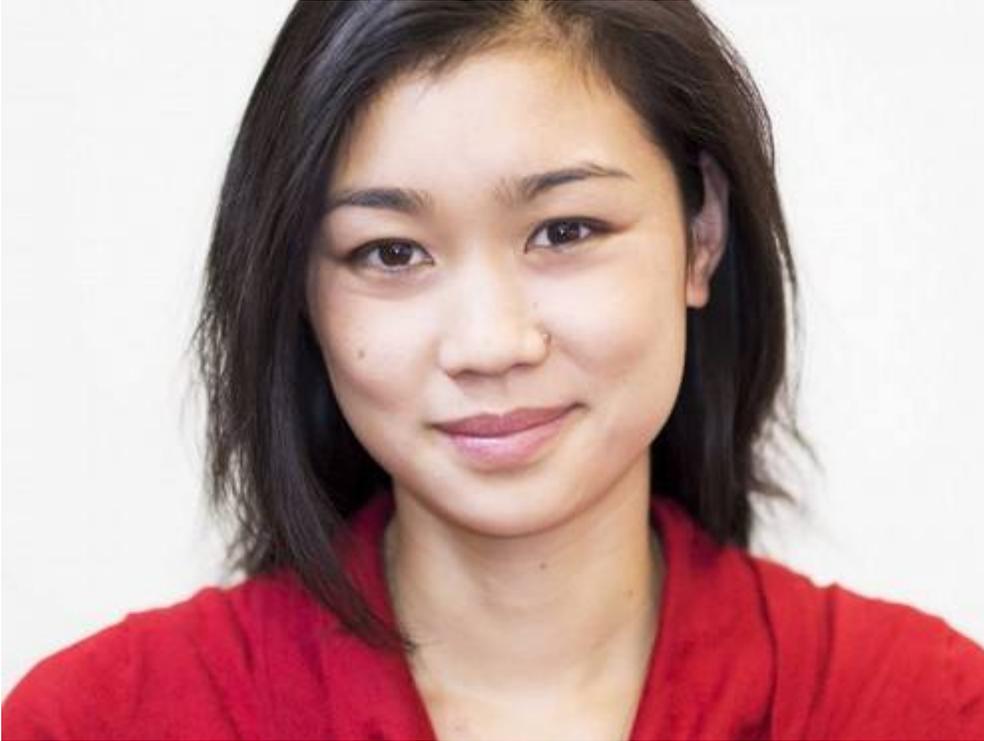
Kubernetes community leader Sarah Novotny [LinkedIn/Sarah Novotny](#)

**Women who have been speaking out on this issue for years are feeling quietly hopeful, if not completely confident, that a real sea change is coming.**



[Gisela Giardino / Flickr](#)

**As respected engineer and diversity advocate Tracy Chou told Business Insider, "What I'm sensing now is a build-up of frustration and rage that's just tipping over, with more individuals that have enough reputation and leverage to be able to speak up, and the fear of repercussion slightly mitigated by strength in numbers. But the fear is still very much there."**



Pinterest

**Chou adds, "I am a tiny bit hopeful that more visibility into these inner workings of Silicon Valley will help the industry clean itself up a tiny bit, but I also worry that there will be negative repercussions in other ways: for example, male VCs becoming even less likely to want to meet or work with female founders or female colleagues."**



[Hafid Alfonso](#)

**As Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg [has been warning for years](#): For real, permanent change to take place, more VCs need to fund women-led startups, more women need to be hired for executive management positions and women need to be paid equally.**

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg Ruben Sprich/Reuters