

Sexist Comments & Responses: Study Introduction and Overview

Sexism takes many forms, from blatant and aggressive to unintentional and subtle. Gender-related societal attitudes, social norms, unconscious biases, and microaggressions all contribute to sexist behaviors and attitudes that are partially responsible for much of the inequity women face every day. Researchers have noted that “in both private and public spaces, women encounter messages that reinforce gender roles and stereotypes, demean women as a gender group, and sexually objectify women.”¹ Sexist comments and remarks are prevalent and normalized in everyday conversation, public discourse, and virtually every other social setting. Though not the only form of sexism, sexist comments often take people by surprise, leaving women wishing they were better prepared to respond and refute this form of sexist expression. Further, face-to-face confrontation of sexism can be extremely difficult, so in an attempt to avoid backlash or retaliation, women often choose to ignore or minimize the sexism they experience.²

As sexist comments are pervasive, and appropriate responses elusive, this research study was designed with the intent of collecting and analyzing a wide variety of sexist comments experienced by women across the state of Utah, in addition to the responses women made (or wish they had made) to such comments. The goal of this research and policy brief series is primarily to educate the public on the many forms of conscious and unconscious sexist comments made by individuals (both men and women). Language and related behaviors can demean and disempower women, even when people are not aware that their words are problematic. In addition, by examining the types of responses reported in our study, along with other responses supported by scholarly research, we aim to equip women with the tools they need to better combat the sexism they experience from day to day.

Study Background & Overview

During May–June of 2020, an online survey instrument was administered to a nonprobability sample of Utah women representing diverse settings, backgrounds, and situations (e.g., age, marital status, education, race/ethnicity, parenthood status, employment status, faith tradition, and county/region). A call for participants was announced through the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) monthly newsletter, social media platforms, and website. UWLP partners, collaborators, and followers also distributed to their circles of influence. Overall, 1,115 respondents started the survey, and 839 Utah women participated enough to provide usable data.

The survey consisted of three parts: (1) participant demographic information, (2) a nine-item Likert scale with questions about participants’ perceptions of sexism in Utah, and

(3) an open response section inviting participants to share up to four sexist comments they had heard, along with any response the participant may have made (or wish they made) to the commenter. In this last section, space was provided for participants to describe the person making the comment and the setting in which the comment was made.

This is the first of five briefs focusing on the comprehensive findings from this study. The purpose of this inaugural brief is to set the stage by sharing participant demographics, the quantitative results of the nine-item scale about participants’ perceptions of sexism in Utah, and an overview of the qualitative comment findings generally. The briefs that follow will provide more in-depth analysis and examples for each of the four themes and related subcategories.

The demographics for the 839 respondents are summarized in Table 1. It is important to note that this sample is not representative of the state as a whole. For example, when compared to overall state demographics, this study under sampled women of color, women with less formal education, and women who are part-time workers, students, and full-time homemakers.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

| |
|---|
| <i>Age:</i> 18–29 (20.0%), 30–39 (27.3%), 40–49 (28.3%), 50–59 (16.2%), 60–69 (6.9%), 70+ (1.2%) |
| <i>Marital Status:</i> married (72.2%), separated/divorced (6.7%), single (18.5%), widowed (1.1%), domestic partner (1.5%) |
| <i>Education:</i> high school (1.1%), some college (7.5%), associate degree (3.5%), bachelor’s degree (37.8%), master’s degree (32.2%), doctorate degree (18.0%) |
| <i>Race/Ethnicity:</i> White (88.0%), Hispanic/Latina (4.5%), Two or more (4.4%), Asian (1.5%), Pacific Islander (0.8%), Other (0.4%), Black (0.2%), American Indian (0.1%) |
| <i>Children:</i> Yes (65.9%), No (34.1%) |
| <i>Employment Status:</i> full-time (74.6%), unemployed (13.0%), part-time (3.9%), full-time homemaker (3.9%), full-time student (2.7%), retired (1.8%) |
| <i>Faith Tradition:</i> Latter-day Saint (64.9%), No religion (23.2%), Other Christian (7.1%), Other (3.6%), Religious (non-Christian) (1.2%) |
| <i>County:</i> Utah (44.3%), Salt Lake (37.1%), Davis/Weber/Tooele/Morgan (9.4%), Box Elder/Cache/Rich (3.4%), Washington/Kane/Iron/Beaver/Garland (2.4%), Summit/Wasatch (2.0%), Carbon/Emery/Grand/San Juan (1.2%), Juab/Millard/Piute/Sanpete/Sevier/Wayne (0.1%), Daggett, Duchesne/Uintah (0.0%) |

Note: Percentages in some categories do not equal 100% due to decimal rounding or individuals not responding to specific questions.

Of note in the demographics, the age of participants was spread somewhat equally. Most participants (91.5%) had an associate degree or higher and lived in Utah or Salt Lake counties (81.4%). There was a higher-than-expected number of unemployed participants (13.0%) as well as those who identified as “no religion” (23.2%).

Perceptions of Sexism in Utah

Study participants responded to nine statements by choosing agreement levels on a seven-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 4=neutral, 7=strongly agree). Along with the statements, Table 2 includes the statistic mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*S.D.*) for each.

Table 2: Perceptions of Sexism in Utah

| Statements | <i>M</i> | <i>S.D.</i> |
|---|----------|-------------|
| 1. I have experienced bias (subtle or overt) that I feel is due to my gender. | 5.97 | 1.52 |
| 2. I hear sexist comments often. | 4.30 | 1.74 |
| 3. Some people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it. | 6.34 | 1.17 |
| 4. Women are more likely to hear sexist comments in Utah than elsewhere in the US. | 4.42 | 1.81 |
| 5. My opportunities have been limited because of the biased attitudes of others about gender. | 4.38 | 1.91 |
| 6. Most Utah men are supportive of advancing women into leadership roles. | 3.44 | 1.53 |
| 7. Women need to be prepared to be leaders. | 6.32 | 1.21 |
| 8. I believe women can find meaningful opportunities to thrive in Utah. | 5.65 | 1.37 |
| 9. Utah is making progress in terms of gender equity. | 4.48 | 1.50 |

The two items that received the highest levels of agreement were “Some people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it” and “Women need to be prepared to be leaders.” The statement the study participants agreed with the least was “Most Utah men are supportive of advancing women into leadership roles.”

Additional statistical tests were used to determine correlations and relationships between the statements above and the demographic information provided in Table 1. Each statement is discussed below along with the demographics that were found to have statistical significance:

Statement 1: The first statement focused on whether the respondent felt she had experienced bias (subtle or overt) due to her gender. Although most Latter-day Saint women who responded agreed at some level ($N=446$) with this statement, 35 answered neutral and 61 disagreed. Even with this, Latter-day Saint women’s responses were significantly lower on this item (5.74) than all other categories in the “Faith Tradition” demographic (i.e., non-Christian religious=6.20, no religion=6.38, other Christian=6.42, and other=6.53). In addition, those who had more education also had higher agreement, and women from Utah County (5.74) had signif-

icantly lower levels of agreement than those from Salt Lake County (6.24).

Statement 2: Married women (4.18) responded that they hear fewer sexist comments than those who are separated or divorced (4.45), single (4.67), a domestic partner (4.69), or widowed (4.89). Latter-day Saint respondents (4.04) also believe that they hear fewer sexist comments than women in all other faith tradition categories (up to 5.50). Also, even though they were just slightly above neutral, those who live in Salt Lake County (4.56), Carbon, Emery, Grand, or San Juan counties (4.60), and Summit or Wasatch Counties (4.88) responded that they hear sexist comments more often than those in other areas of the state.

Statement 3: Younger respondents and those who are more educated had significantly more agreement with the statement that some people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it. In addition, Latter-day Saint women agreed significantly less—although still a 6.25 mean—while religious (non-Christian) agreed the most with the statement.

Statement 4: Younger respondents (18–39-year-olds) agreed significantly more (4.68–4.61) with the statement, “Women are more likely to hear sexist comments in Utah than elsewhere in the US,” than study participants over 60 (3.68–4.32). The statistical means substantially differed among faith traditions: Latter-day Saints (4.13), no religion (4.81), non-Christian religious (4.89), other Christian (5.29), and other (5.52).

Statement 5: In terms of the statement, “My opportunities have been limited because of the biased attitudes of others about gender,” Latter-day Saint respondents agreed significantly less (4.16) than those of other faith traditions, particularly “Other” religions (5.48). Women in Utah (4.14) and Davis, Weber, Tooele, or Morgan (4.10) counties had significantly lower agreement than women in Salt Lake (4.70) and Carbon, Emery, Grand, or San Juan (4.80) counties.

Statement 6: Married respondents (3.53), compared to separated and divorced study participants (2.82), were significantly more likely to agree with statement, “Most Utah men are supportive of advancing women into leadership roles.” The statistical mean for the sample overall was only 3.44, which means there was more disagreement with this statement than agreement. Study participants in Salt Lake County (3.23) had significantly less agreement than those from the region that included Washington, Kane, Iron, Beaver, or Garfield counties (4.40).

Statement 7: Although most people generally agreed (6.32), there is slight evidence that older respondents (40–49=6.42, 50–59=6.50, 60–69=6.64, and 70 and older=6.70) were more likely to agree with the statement, “Women need to be prepared to be leaders” compared to those who were younger (18–29=6.12, 30–39=6.17). In terms of faith traditions, non-Christian religious respondents had the highest

levels of agreement (6.60), followed by other Christian (6.44), and Latter-day Saints (6.39).

Statement 8: Latter-day Saint women agreed more often (5.84) with the statement that women can find meaningful opportunities to thrive in Utah compared to all other faith tradition categories (4.97-5.37).

Statement 9: Latter-day Saint women were more likely to agree (4.77) with the statement, “Utah is making progress in terms of gender equity,” compared to all other faith traditions. Respondents who identified as non-Christian religious had the lowest agreement (3.20). The statistical mean for this statement is fairly neutral (4.48), so there is not a general feeling that Utah is making progress in terms of gender equity. However, respondents from Salt Lake County (4.15) were significantly less likely to agree than those in Utah County (4.70). However, the highest agreement came from Carbon, Emery, Grand, or San Juan (4.80) and Washington, Kane, Iron, Beaver, or Garfield (5.15) counties.

Overall, there could be various interpretations of these data, particularly differences reflected by regions and faith traditions. Some could argue there is more or less sexism in those areas or traditions, while others might argue that regional or social conditioning accounts for the range. The data do not provide enough detail for a clear interpretation.

Sexist Comments – Major Themes

In the first open response section of the survey, the following prompt was given: “List specific examples of sexist comments people have made about or to you in various settings.” In total, the 839 respondents shared 1,750 sexist comments. Before listing each specific comment, participants were asked to answer four questions about the context of each comment, including the gender of the person making the comment, the relative authority of the commenter, the commenter’s approximate age, and the setting in which the comment was made. The context questions were not answered for every comment. The results of comment context questions are found in Table 3.

Table 3: Commenter Descriptors and Context

| Descriptor | Context |
|---|--|
| Gender of commenter (N=1,619) | Man (84.6%), Woman (14.5%), Other (0.9%) |
| Relative authority of commenter (N=1,611) | Someone who has/had authority/influence over me (51.3%), A peer (neither authority level) (40.8%), Someone over whom I have/had authority (7.9%) |
| Approximate age of commenter (N=1,610) | Child or youth (0.9%), 18–25 (9.1%), 26–35 (14.3%), 36–45 (23.9%), 46–59 (35.5%), 60–70 (14.8%), Over 70 (1.6%) |
| Setting in which comment was made (N=1,624) | Workplace (58.2%), School (7.5%), Church (9.6%), Community (7.6%), Political (3.3%), Home/family (10.2%), Other (3.6%) |

Two researchers did a comprehensive analysis and coded all comments into 23 separate categories, which were then grouped under four major themes. The four themes into which all categories were placed are as follows: (1) Inequity and Bias, (2) Objectification, (3) Stereotypes, and (4) Undervaluing Women.

The four major themes, with their related comment categories (along with total number of mentions of each code) are found in Table 4. Importantly, many comments were included in several categories, as individual statements were often related to a variety of sexist themes and topics. Hence, the total code counts far surpass the 1,750 total comments analyzed, and percent totals exceed 100%. In addition, one comment category, direct aggression, included comments from all themes, and hence is not included as a single theme. Because researchers felt direct aggression was important to capture and understand, it is included on its own.

Table 4: Comment Major Themes and Sub-Categories

| Themes & Sub-Categories | # | % |
|---|------|------|
| 1. Inequity and Bias | | |
| Defensiveness/backlash against feminism | 82 | 4.7 |
| Gender inequity (general) | 194 | 11.1 |
| Gender pay/promotion/hiring inequity | 59 | 3.4 |
| Unconscious bias | 323 | 18.5 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 658 | 37.6 |
| 2. Objectification | | |
| Accusations of using sex to get ahead | 13 | 0.7 |
| Excluded from work activities | 31 | 1.8 |
| Focus on physical appearance/bodies | 251 | 14.3 |
| Intersectional discrimination | 43 | 2.5 |
| Sexual harassment | 122 | 7.0 |
| Sexualizing women | 86 | 4.9 |
| Unwanted sexual advances | 79 | 4.5 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 625 | 35.7 |
| 3. Stereotypes | | |
| Benevolent sexism | 52 | 3.0 |
| Double bind/double standard | 50 | 2.9 |
| Gender stereotypes (general) | 388 | 22.2 |
| Motherhood penalty | 151 | 8.6 |
| Women should prioritize homemaker roles | 346 | 19.8 |
| Women’s internalized sexism | 257 | 14.7 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 1244 | 71.1 |
| 4. Undervaluing Women | | |
| “Affirmative Action” assumption | 32 | 1.8 |
| Assumed incompetence | 104 | 5.9 |
| Infantilizing/condescending | 270 | 15.4 |
| Sexist language/terms | 92 | 5.3 |
| Undervaluing women’s contributions | 389 | 22.2 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 887 | 50.7 |
| Independent Theme: Direct Aggression | 41 | 2.3 |

As a reminder, each of the four primary themes will be highlighted in an upcoming brief, which will include an in-depth analysis with a sampling of the comments and responses. Specific examples are critical to bettering the understanding of the many forms that sexist comments can take, whether blatant, subtle, aggressive, and/or unintentional. However, to

set the stage for the series, this brief provides a general description of each category, organized by major theme:

1. Inequity and Bias

- a. *Defensiveness/backlash against feminism*: Comments that indicate the speaker disapproves of feminism or other women's equality/empowerment efforts.
- b. *Gender inequity*: The phenomenon by which women are treated differently and disadvantageously, solely because of their gender.³
- c. *Gender pay/promotion/hiring inequity*: Comments that demonstrate that women are discriminated against in various aspects of their professional lives because of circumstances or assumptions related to their gender.
- d. *Unconscious bias*: Stereotypes and beliefs regarding certain groups of people that individuals hold without being consciously aware.⁴

2. Objectification

- a. *Accusations of using sex to get ahead*: Comments centering on the idea that women use sexuality to gain an unfair advantage.
- b. *Excluded from work activities*: Comments specifically related to women being excluded at work because of their gender, with the implication that women are viewed as sex objects rather than as colleagues.
- c. *Focus on physical appearance/bodies*: Comments focused on women's bodies as part of an interaction, whether positive or negative, sexual, or otherwise.
- d. *Intersectional discrimination*: Comments directed at more than one dimension of an individual; for example, sexist comments that also included references to race, age, weight, religion, or other elements.
- e. *Sexual harassment*: Comments or behaviors toward women in workplace or similar settings that are sexual in nature.
- f. *Sexualizing women*: Comments that focus primarily on women as sexual objects, rather than as whole individuals.
- g. *Unwanted sexual advances*: Solicitations or advances toward women that are unwelcome.

3. Stereotypes

- a. *Benevolent sexism*: Comments or behaviors that treat women differently in what seems to be a positive way but that can undermine or otherwise penalize them.
- b. *Double bind/double standard*: The phenomenon where women are expected to exhibit or shun certain behaviors relating to gender stereotypes and are punished when behaving contrary to gender norms.
- c. *Gender stereotypes (general)*: Over-generalizations about the characteristics and qualities of an entire group, based on social norms related to gender.⁵
- d. *Motherhood penalty*: Situations when women in professional settings are penalized (by loss of opportunity, pay, advancement, etc.) once they become mothers.

- e. *Women should prioritize homemaker roles*: Comments indicating that women's highest priorities should be connected to marriage, motherhood, and related roles and behaviors.
- f. *Women's internalized sexism*: Sexist beliefs and attitudes held by women about other women or about themselves.

4. Undervaluing Women

- a. *"Affirmative Action" assumption*: Comments that indicate the speaker believes women achieved success or position only because of a quota or an affirmative action policy.
- b. *Assumed incompetence*: Comments indicating the expectation that women are less competent or capable in various areas than men are.
- c. *Infantilizing/condescending*: Comments where women are treated as if they are children or otherwise need to be taken care of, including where men treat women as if they cannot take care of themselves.
- d. *Sexist language/terms*: The use of language that de-means women in a variety of ways.
- e. *Undervaluing women's contributions*: The belief that women are less capable, intelligent, and competent than men solely because of their gender, including holding low expectations of women because of their gender.

Direct Aggression: This additional category includes comments that overlapped with each of the other four major themes, yet had a unique element that researchers believed was important to extract separately as well. This code was added when the behavior of the person making the comment was particularly aggressive, angry, or forceful.

Participant Responses to Sexist Comments

In the second open response section, participants were given the following prompt in relationship to each sexist comment reported: "Share any responses you or others made at the time (or thought you should have made after the fact), if applicable." Respondents shared 1,436 responses to sexist comments. After thorough analysis by two researchers, these responses were divided into five major themes, each with subcategories: (1) No Response, (2) Direct Response, (3) Emotional Response, (4) Indirect Response, and (5) Internal Afterthoughts, which may have occurred any time after the sexist comment was made, whether within hours or after many years.

In addition to these five main themes of responses, eight other categories also emerged: discussed with others, experienced backlash after response, proved them wrong, reported commenter to a superior, successful response/had desired effect, third person response, unsuccessful response, and walked away/ended engagement. The counts and occurrence percentages for these themes and categories are found in

Table 5. As with the comments themselves, many of these responses were assigned to two or more categories, hence the counts in Table 5 will surpass the total number of responses, and the percentages add up to more than 100.

Table 5: Response Major Themes and Sub-Categories

| Themes & Sub-Categories | # | % |
|--|-----|------|
| 1. <i>No Response (general)</i> | 198 | 13.8 |
| Felt unable to reply | 97 | 6.8 |
| No practical way to respond | 27 | 1.9 |
| Shocked | 115 | 8.0 |
| Useless to reply | 33 | 2.3 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 470 | 32.7 |
| 2. <i>Direct Response (general)</i> | 49 | 3.4 |
| Direct question back to commenter | 74 | 5.2 |
| Providing information/education | 431 | 30.0 |
| Rebuttal | 140 | 9.7 |
| Snarkiness/humor | 134 | 9.3 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 828 | 57.7 |
| 3. <i>Emotional Response (general)</i> | 3 | 0.2 |
| Felt ashamed/embarrassed | 16 | 1.1 |
| Felt hurt/disappointed/angry | 66 | 4.6 |
| Wished someone would have stood up | 14 | 1.0 |
| Wondered if commenter was right | 18 | 1.3 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 117 | 8.1 |
| 4. <i>Indirect Response (general)</i> | 125 | 8.7 |
| Laughed it off/changed the subject | 45 | 3.1 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 170 | 11.8 |
| 5. <i>Internal Afterthoughts (general)</i> | 99 | 6.9 |
| Provided information | 94 | 6.5 |
| Rebuttal | 86 | 6.0 |
| Should have reported the comments | 22 | 1.5 |
| Snarkiness/humor | 26 | 1.8 |
| <i>Total Mentions</i> | 327 | 22.8 |
| <i>Other Themes</i> | | |
| Discussed with others | 82 | 5.7 |
| Experienced backlash after response | 32 | 2.2 |
| Proved them wrong | 26 | 1.8 |
| Reported comment to a superior | 57 | 4.0 |
| Successful response/had desired effect | 38 | 2.6 |
| Third person response | 67 | 4.7 |
| Unsuccessful response | 110 | 7.7 |
| Walked away/ended engagement | 117 | 8.1 |

Conclusions and Recommendations

As mentioned, this introduction and overview is the first of five briefs that will be released over the coming months. Each subsequent brief will focus on one of the four major themes of sexist comments identified in the study: Inequity and Bias, Objectification, Stereotypes, and Undervaluing Women, along with the types of responses women reported making upon hearing such comments.

In summary, the purpose of this brief series is twofold: First, we hope to educate readers on the various ways that language and related behaviors can demean and disempower women, especially for those who may not realize their words are problematic. And second, by examining the types of responses reported in our study, along with other responses

supported by scholarly research, we aim to equip women with the tools they need to better combat the sexism they experience from day to day. By raising awareness of the widespread occurrence and damaging effects of sexist language, comments, beliefs, and behaviors, we can reduce the frequency of sexism in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and the state as a whole.

¹ Simon, S., & O'Brien, L. T. (2015). Confronting sexism: Exploring the effects of nonsexist credentials on the costs of target confrontations. *Sex Roles, 73*(5–6), 245–257. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0513-x>

² Mallett, R. K., Ford, T. E., & Woodzicka, J. A. (2016). What did he mean by that? Humor decreases attributions of sexism and confrontation of sexist jokes. *Sex Roles, 75*(5–6), 272–284. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0605-2>

³ Oxford Reference. (n.d.) “Gender inequality.” <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095846609>

⁴ University of California, San Francisco, Office of Diversity and Outreach. (n.d.) “Unconscious bias.” <https://diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias>

⁵ Study.com. (n.d.) “Gender stereotypes: Definitions and examples.” <https://study.com/academy/lesson/gender-stereotypes-definition-examples-quiz.html>

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