

Sexist Comments & Responses: Inequity and Bias

Although sexist comments and remarks are prevalent and normalized in everyday conversation, public discourse, and virtually every other social setting throughout the world, researchers at the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) wanted to understand how women experience these comments in Utah. This is the second of five briefs focused on the results of an extensive study of sexist comments. The “[Study Introduction and Overview](#)”¹ was published November 4, 2021, and more will follow. The 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 series is to educate the public (both men and women) on the many forms that conscious and unconscious sexist comments can take, from egregious statements to those that are more subtle. Additionally, we aim to equip women with the tools to confront more successfully the sexism they experience.

Study Background

During May–June of 2020, an online survey instrument was administered to a nonprobability sample of Utah women representing various settings, backgrounds, and situations (age, marital status, education, race/ethnicity, parenthood status, employment status, faith tradition, and county/region; see specific participant demographics details in the first brief in this series).² A call for participants was announced through the 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. As each participant was allowed to submit up to four comments, 1,750 unique scenarios were reported. Importantly, not all responses were limited strictly to sexist comments; some respondents also included sexist situations and behaviors, including nonverbal actions.

From the original study analysis, four major themes emerged: Inequity and Bias, Objectification, Stereotypes, and Undervaluing Women. This research and policy brief focuses on the first of these: Inequity and Bias.

Findings – Comments and Remarks

The analysis of the responses within the Inequity and Bias theme produced four specific categories:

1. *Unconscious bias*: Stereotypes and beliefs regarding certain groups of people that individuals hold without being consciously aware.³
2. *Gender inequity (general)*: The phenomenon by which women are treated differently and disadvantageously, solely because of their gender.⁴
3. *Defensiveness/backlash against feminism*: Comments that indicate the speaker disapproves of feminism or other women’s equality/empowerment efforts.
4. *Gender pay, promotion, and 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.

Table 1 shows a count of the total number of mentions for each of the categories, as well as the percentage representation of the total number of comments (N=1,750). Overall, 37.6% of all comments reported in the study related to one of the categories under the “Inequity and Bias” theme. It should be noted that many comments were included in several categories, as individual statements were often related to a variety of sexist themes and topics, and there is some overlap between categories within this theme.

Table 1: Inequity and Bias Categories

Categories	#	%
Unconscious bias	323	18.5
Gender inequity (general)	194	11.1
Defensiveness/backlash against feminism	82	4.7
Gender pay, promotion, and hiring inequity	59	3.4
Total Mentions	658	37.6

It is interesting to note that the participants who shared comments related to this theme were most often white, married women with children; the participants also worked full time, were 40–49 years old, had a master’s degree, and were a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A super majority (77.4%) of these women strongly agreed with the statement that they felt people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it, and 70.2% strongly agreed that they had personally experienced bias because of their gender. Also, 67.3% of the respondents strongly agreed that women need to be prepared to be leaders; however, more than one-third (35.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that Utah men are supportive of advancing women into leadership roles.

In addition to reporting sexist comments, 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 specific to the categories under the Inequity and Bias theme are found in Table 2.

Table 2: Inequity & Bias Commenters (Descriptors and Context)

Descriptor	Context
Gender of commenter (N=627)	Man (87.1%), Woman (11.8%), Other (1.1%)
Relative authority of commenter (N=625)	Someone who has/had authority/influence over me (54.9%), A peer (neither authority level) (37.1%), Someone over whom I have/had authority (8.0%)
Approximate age of commenter (N=626)	Child or youth (1.1%), 18–25 (8.5%), 26–35 (12.8%), 36–45 (26.5%), 46–59 (36.6%), 60–70 (12.3%), Over 70 (2.2%)
Setting in which comment was made (N=628)	Workplace (61.5%), School (5.9%), Church (9.1%), Community (5.9%), Political (4.9%), Home/family (9.2%), Other (3.5%)

Category 1: Unconscious Bias

Unconscious Bias was the most common category of the Inequity and Bias theme. Unconscious bias is frequently at play any time discrimination or inequity exists; indeed, a high percentage of all the sexist comments reported in this study could have been included in the category of unconscious bias. To simplify and clarify this category, we limited the designation of “Unconscious Bias” to comments related to broad stereotypes or beliefs regarding women about which the speaker was generally unaware. Given the narrow definition, 323 comments still fit into this category. Of note, many of the responses were not strictly individual comments—a substantial number referred to more general situations or circumstances. A similar pattern appeared in other categories, but it was particularly prevalent in this one. Comments categorized as “Unconscious Bias” were most commonly made within the workplace by a man who was between 46 and 59 years old and who held a position of authority.

First, many of the following comments revealed the speaker’s assumption about women’s capabilities or expertise (or lack thereof) because of their gender:

“I am an attorney, and I went to another law firm to represent my client at a deposition. The young, female receptionist asked if I was the court reporter. . . . They assumed a young woman would be a court reporter and not an attorney.”

“He insisted that it wasn’t sexist to be surprised when a woman had a ‘man’s’ job like dentist, doctor, pilot, etc. He said, ‘It’s not that I don’t think women can do those jobs, it’s just that I’m surprised when they do.’”

“I was taking a standard exam and the person running me through the timing/rules asked what score I was hoping for and told me it was ‘a high score for a girl.’”

“I’m a travel photographer with a social media presence. Men frequently assume I’m a guy, based on the quality of my work.”

Second, other comments showed a tendency to assign roles or responsibilities to women because of their gender:

“I’m a VP at my company. After an executive meeting, the CEO asked me, the only female in the meeting, ‘so you’ll share the notes?’ No one asked me to take notes. It was an assumption that the only female would also play secretary.”

“There were comments about being the ‘mom’ of the office or the ‘Den Mother.’ . . . In a work setting, coming from male colleagues, it comes off as degrading.”

“He mentioned that it made sense that I work in my role in HR even though he had nothing to go on other than my appearance (woman of color).”

“A man in my workplace said, ‘I mean this as a compliment, but you don’t *look* like an engineer.’”

Third, comments that fell under the umbrella of “mansplaining,”—unknowingly treating women as if they were less capable, or that they have less to contribute because of their gender—were also examples of unconscious bias:

“At the gym I frequent, a gentleman kept coming over to my workout area to teach me how to properly use certain pieces of equipment. I have been trained in this exercise, have used the equipment daily for 15 years, but his mansplaining was obnoxious.”

“Over the past 15 years, I’ve had at least six different men explain to me in emails that I didn’t know enough about the topic I was discussing (and of which I am an expert), because I was a woman.”

“This one happens regularly. I’ll make a comment in a meeting that isn’t paid much attention to. Then, my boss (who is male), later throws out the same comment or idea, and there is a lot more attention or value placed on it.”

“[I was] trying to get a candidate . . . to understand what needed to be done. . . . He repeatedly checked with men before taking my advice.”

Fourth, another topic that emerged in the unconscious bias category was women being excluded (intentionally or not) in various settings and circumstances because of their gender. For example:

“He was putting together a fantasy sports team . . . and asked every male . . . if they would like to join. It was very obvious to everyone that he purposely did not ask the women.”

“I have received a number of group emails in which I am the only female recipient, and we are all addressed as ‘gentlemen.’”

“I was visibly pregnant when my husband and I applied for a construction loan. The loan officer told me he wasn’t comfortable including my income as part of consideration for

our loan application, because given my condition he was positive I would be staying home and losing that income.”

“We were told, ‘We’ve got a provision in the will for any of the grandsons who want to pursue a law or medical degree.’”

Finally, numerous comments in this section also include advice or expectations related to women due to their gender:

“As part of an evaluation I received as I was moving up into a major leadership role, one of the four evaluators on my evaluation team made this comment: ‘Don’t forget that you are a mother and to take care of those needs.’ . . . I have never seen a time where anyone has listed ‘remember you are a father’ to the men being evaluated.”

“A problem was brought up and being addressed. . . . After looking at the time, my boss, who was frustrated, told me it was probably time for me to get home to my children and I was dismissed. The men continued their discussion.”

“This person pulled me aside after a meeting where I had expressed a strong opinion. He said that I was being emotional, irrational, and aggressive (almost like he had read a book on gender bias to learn what to say).”

“I asked a fellow faculty member how women were successful on campus as faculty members. I was told that in order to be successful as a woman, I needed to ‘be thin, be pretty, and be quiet.’”

Category 2: Gender Inequity (General)

The second most common category that emerged under the Inequity and Bias theme was gender inequity (general). This was somewhat of a catch-all category for comments that clearly disadvantaged or disparaged women solely because of their gender. Many comments that fell under this category had overlap with other categories as well, but they were distinguished by an additional layer of difference between how women and men would be treated in each situation. There were 194 comments in this category, which were most commonly made within the workplace by a man between the ages of 46 and 59 who had authority over the participant.

First, many of the comments in this category included explicit frustrations from women that they regularly experienced comments and behaviors that men would rarely, if ever, experience. Some examples include the following:

“I hear things like, ‘The new girl is so nice to work with. She is always smiling.’ I’ve never heard this said about men/boys. And men are *rarely* referred to as boys, but women are consistently referred to as girls.”

“A manager said, ‘I don’t know how you handle so many children plus your job!’ No one would say this to a man, plus then he viewed me as unable to take on leadership roles.”

“At a formal function, all of the male professors in the room were introduced as Dr., but the female professors were introduced by their first names.”

“When I ran for public office, there were different questions asked to me and to my opponent. I got the question about how I will balance work and family. He got the question about his qualifications.”

“My daughter’s best friend’s mom called my daughter and her two friends ‘floozy’ because they showed up at the home of the best friend, who was a boy. I guess boys are allowed to visit girls unannounced, but not the other way around.”

Second, another common gender inequity thread described situations in which men were simply given advantages or were otherwise preferred over women. For example:

“My manager said, ‘Your peer will be representing the study you did because it will look better coming from a man.’”

“I once had a client tell me in no uncertain terms that they would really prefer to work with a man, ‘just because, you know, it’s accounting.’”

“When the individual realized I was the manager, they asked for the actual man who is in charge.”

“A delegate said . . . he was supporting my opponent [a man] because he wanted to ‘vote for someone who is a leader.’”

“Twice when applying for a loan I was turned down. When my husband reapplied, he was approved over the phone.”

“When I wanted to start an early morning yoga class, . . . I was told by a [male church leader] that that time is reserved for men only basketball and women need to be at home until their children leave for school.”

“My husband and I were appearing in court on the same case. We were both at counsel’s table. The judge referred to me as my husband’s ‘side-kick.’”

Lastly, comments related to presumably “innate” differences between men and women were the subject of many of the comments in this category:

“A coworker stated, ‘The best news about the (new hire) is that he doesn’t have a uterus.’ I was days away from delivering and going on maternity leave.”

“Referring to an upcoming business trip where I was traveling out of state for a few days, a coworker stated, ‘Who is going to watch your baby? Aren’t you breastfeeding? Should you really be leaving your baby?’”

“Our bishop came into [our church children’s organization] a couple of years ago to remind the boys that a father/son campout was planned for the following week. The girls expressed great disappointment and asked our bishop when they would get to go camping. He said they couldn’t, eliciting the response from one girl, ‘What did we do wrong?’ . . . My bishop emailed me later with the incredible reply that they wouldn’t consider a girls’ campout because women’s bodies are too demanding.”

“I beat a boy my age at stick pull, and people started making fun of him because he was beat by a girl. Even my dad said he felt bad for the guy, as if that should be humiliating.”

“She said, ‘Girls just aren’t good at sports. They are always slower and suck to watch.’”

Category 3: Defensiveness/Backlash Against Feminism

The third most common category that emerged from the analysis demonstrated defensiveness and/or backlash against

individuals, activities, or ideologies that seemed connected to feminism or support for women's issues in general. There were 82 comments made in this category; most were made within the workplace by a man—most often a peer—between the ages of 36 and 45. These comments took several different forms.

First, many comments referenced the “#MeToo” movement, ranging from blaming women for the negative effects of the movement, minimizing the phenomenon, or feeling targeted as men. Comments in this area included:

“He said, ‘If women weren’t seducing men in the workplace, then these ‘#metoo’ situations wouldn’t be happening.’”

“My HR director stated, ‘With times like these, . . . oh, man, it’s scary to be a man. Would you ever tell me if you’ve been ‘me too’d?’ (he chuckled).”

“A male professor said the movement was starting to feel like a ‘witch hunt.’”

Second, many comments in this category also took an approach of warning, letting “feminist” women know they that were hurting their prospects of marriage, motherhood, and a traditional feminine life:

“I was told that because I have short hair and more feminist leaning ideas, I wasn’t marriage material.”

“He told me that having a successful career makes me intimidating to men and that I won’t ever find someone to date and marry unless I tone things down.”

“A church leader told me to temper my career ambitions because my primary focus should be to raise a family.”

Third, another subset of comments in this category revealed the idea that efforts to support women would end up hurting men, as shown by the following examples:

“A male colleague said, ‘By trying to bring attention to females in the workplace, you are discriminating against men.’”

“We were celebrating International Women’s Day with a lunch provided by our company. A male coworker asked why men don’t get a day to celebrate them.”

“He said, ‘They are only letting minorities and women in right now’ (referring to grad school).”

Finally, a fourth topic that emerged in this category was a form of internalized sexism, wherein women rejected feminism and related efforts by stating that such movements were not needed and did not represent their values or goals:

“Women have said, ‘You are just trying to cause problems for real women. I have never felt unequal, so there is not a problem with women’s equality or for us to have more of a voice. You need to stop making a fuss and being so angry.’”

“A woman stated, ‘I am not a feminist! Women like that are not changing the world for the better. They are damaging families and the community.’”

“The comments that hurt the most come from other women. . . . Two women came and sat behind me and started to speak audibly about ‘Those stupid women’ who saw themselves as a feminist. Each phrase made it clearer that they were talking about me and intended for me to hear every word.”

Category 4: Gender Pay, Promotion, & Hiring Inequity

A final category under the theme of “Inequity and Bias” relates specifically to the workplace in terms of gender inequities in the areas of pay, promotion, and hiring. There were 59 individual comments in this category, many very similar to one another. Women identified that these sexist comments were most frequently made within the workplace by a man who was either 36–45 or 46–59 years old and was in a position of authority over the participant.

First, the most prevalent comment type in this category related to women not getting the job, promotion, or raise she was up for because there was a man who needed it more because he had a family to support:

“My boss came to me unsolicited and sat me down and proceeded to tell me that he was the last of a dying breed of male chauvinist pigs and that if a man applied for a job, and I applied for the same job, regardless of qualifications, the man would get the job because he had a family to feed.”

“I was told, ‘He got the raise even though you have the same qualifications because he has a family to support.’”

Second, a variation on this theme was an assumption that women’s income was supplemental to an overall family income, so she did not need to earn as much. For example:

“A colleague said, ‘Your husband makes a good salary, so this salary is more than plenty.’”

“A company boss discussing annual pay increases said that a female employee should get less of a raise because her income is supplemental.”

“When I asked for a raise commensurate with a male colleague’s salary, I was told that because I didn’t have children and wasn’t the head of household, I didn’t need to make as much money as he did.”

Third, another related set of comments in this category demonstrated that women miss out on opportunities for advancement due to their marital and/or family status:

“During a job interview, I was asked what my husband did for work. When I responded he was still finishing school, I was asked if I would follow my husband out-of-state should the opportunity arise after he completed school. The interviewer elaborated, stating that women typically follow their husbands’ careers, and not vice-versa.”

“A manager stated, ‘You really should be promoted for all the work you do and contributions you make. But you understand that he has a career here and has a family to take care of. He needs the opportunity to make a name for him-

self. Besides, you will probably get married and leave so it won't make any difference to you or your career.”

“My boss told me he will not hire women in their twenties who are married, or will possibly soon be married, because they will eventually take maternity leave. And even if they come back to work, it's too disruptive.”

Finally, comments within this category included women's unequal treatment at work, which was described as natural, inevitable, and built into the local culture. For example:

“When I moved and needed to hire my replacement, he was given double what I was making, even though he had a bachelor's degree and I had a master's degree. When I approached my supervisor, . . . he said that was ‘the way it was’ and there was no point in trying to fight it since I was on my way out.”

“I learned that in private men were caught discussing our salaries and laughing at how much lower they were.”

“A boss used the excuse to pay women less because he would have a hard time if his wife made more money than him.”

Findings – Responses

In addition to sharing sexist comments they had heard, study participants were also asked to share any response they made (or wish they had made) to the comments. In total, 557 responses were reported to comments in the “Inequity and Bias” theme, which were coded into the five broad categories in Table 3 as well as other responses (eight other designations are explained in the [first brief](#) in this series).⁵ As with the comments, many of the responses were coded into several response categories, where relevant, so the category count exceeds 557, and the percent total exceeds 100. Details about these responses are found in Table 3.

Table 3: Inequity & Bias – Response Major Themes

Themes & Categories	#	%
Direct Response	282	50.6
No Response	154	27.6
Internal Afterthoughts	106	19.0
Indirect Response	69	12.4
Emotional Response	32	5.7
Other Responses	183	32.9

Direct Responses

More than half (N=282) of the women's replies incorporated a direct response to the sexist comment. Some asked a question back to the commenter, while others provided information or education, offered a rebuttal, or used humor to respond. Examples include the following:

“My boss asked me to make cookies for an event. I asked which day he wanted me to take off to bake them. The others started to laugh and then he slowly caught onto what he had asked of me. I was the only woman in the room.”

“After a male colleague's comment I said, ‘That was an extremely hurtful thing to say and is not true. Why would you say that?’”

“After being awkwardly left off a lunch invitation, I sat there with my mouth open for a minute. I finally said, ‘Why can't I come to lunch with both of you?’”

“After a peer commented about why a man needed to babysit his kids, I said, ‘He's not babysitting, they are his children; he is simply caring for his children as is his responsibility.’”

“After inquiries about my life, I said, ‘I don't feel comfortable discussing my career choices and social life with you.’”

“After a comment about me staying home with my kids, I replied, ‘How long do *you* think you're going to do this before you retire to become a stay-at-home dad?’”

No Response

Women shared that many times they were so shocked or stunned that they did not say anything in response to the sexist comment. This accounted for 27.6% (N=154) of the responses. Participants made statements such as:

“I was stunned and did not comment. I had vital information to share but withheld because of being offended.”

“I was stunned and froze—I didn't know what I'd expected from my boss, but this was worse than what I could have imagined.”

“I didn't say anything. I didn't feel safe to respond.”

“I just remained silent. I was dumbfounded that someone could be so small-minded.”

Internal Afterthoughts

Many participants reported responses they wish they would have made, once they had time to reflect. These afterthoughts ranged from clever comebacks, to providing information, to wishing they would have reported the comment. Nearly one-fifth (N=106) of responses related to this theme were coded into this category. Examples included:

“I wish I would have set them straight and reported them for sexual harassment at the time.”

“I should have said, ‘What do you mean when you say that I did well for a woman?’”

“I would stop, look him straight in the eye and tell him how inappropriate his comment was and that I would not expect that out of him ever again.”

“What I should have said was ‘that is incredibly sexist.’”

“In retrospect, I might have asked him if he understood why that comment was offensive.”

Indirect Response

In some cases, women responded to sexist comments indirectly, by changing the subject, laughing, or even agreeing with the commenter when they did not know how else to respond. Of all responses grouped into the theme of this brief, 12.4% (N=69) were indirect and were generally recognized to be ineffective. For example:

“I thanked him for the feedback and moved away.”

“I didn’t make a comment to him, but I gave a look of surprise and disgust to another colleague who was also observing this man.”

“I smiled—he was a friend, and he thought he was giving me a compliment.”

Emotional Response

Next, 5.7% were designated as emotional responses; women shared that they felt ashamed, embarrassed, or even hurt or angry, or wished someone had stood up for them in the moment. Responses included the following:

“I was outraged; however, there was little I could do and I didn’t know how to address this.”

“There’s a lot I would have liked to say, but I couldn’t, given our power dynamic. I just ended up feeling lesser-than and angry.”

“I froze and was super embarrassed; I didn’t know what to do.”

“I know I’m angry about these types of comments, but other people are unaware, and my anger won’t help.”

Other Responses

In addition to the five categories of responses above, eight other types of responses were also noted: discussed with others, experienced backlash, proved them wrong, reported to a superior, successful response, third-person response, unsuccessful response, and walked away. In fact, 32.9% of responses related to this overall theme included one of the other response areas. For example:

“I challenged that idea, and all the other men in the room laughed at the exchange.”

“I talked to the leadership and saw no change.”

“I skipped going to church for the next two weeks.”

“I let him know that what he said was terrible, and I immediately started looking for a new job, which I found.”

Though not specifically asked, a number of women mentioned that the responses they gave had the desired effect. Some examples included the following:

“We are good friends, and he thanked me for the feedback and said he would be more aware in the future.”

“We had another conversation later where I explained how often when a woman presents an idea it isn’t accepted or even acknowledged until a man states the same idea. This boss was receptive and invited me to keep giving him feedback.”

“I have recruited another woman to give me credit by saying, ‘It’s nice to see that you agree with her. I also think it’s a good idea.’ I do the same thing for her.”

“Females commented on it amongst ourselves, then one mentioned it to the men, most of whom have been careful to avoid such behavior since then.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

This brief is the second in a series of five related to the UWLP sexist comments research study. Subsequent briefs will focus on the remaining major themes: 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 women make when confronted with sexist behavior, we aim to equip women with the tools they need to combat the sexism they experience from day to day. Speaking up against sexism can be a powerful force for reducing gender inequity, as it can help others challenge their own biases and model more equitable forms of communication.⁶ Further, being prepared to respond to everyday sexism can help women feel more confident in their interactions with others. 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 state.

¹ Scribner, R. T., Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2021, November 4). *Sexist comments & responses: Study introduction and overview*. Utah Women & Leadership Project.

<https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/38-sexist-comments-study-introduction-overview.pdf>

² Scribner, R. T., Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2021, November 4).

³ University of California, San Francisco, Office of Diversity and Outreach. (n.d.). “Unconscious bias.”

<https://diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias>

⁴ Oxford Reference. (n.d.). “Gender inequality.”

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095846609>

⁵ Scribner, R. T., Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2021, November 4).

⁶ Kuschmider, R. (2021, September 4). *What to say when someone says something sexist*. WebMD.

<https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/what-say-someone-says-something-sexist>

Acknowledgements: This brief was made possible through the generous support of the Greg & Jacki Zehner Foundation, Laura Middleton, and Josh & Amber Bird. We would also like to thank Heather Sundahl for her analysis and coding.

Copyright © 2021 Utah Women & Leadership Project