

## Sexist Comments & Responses: Stereotypes

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 sexist comments in Utah. This is the fourth of five briefs presenting the results of an extensive study designed to collect and analyze both the wide variety of sexist comments Utah women experienced and the responses women made (or wish they had made) to such comments. The goal of this series is to educate both men and women on the many forms that conscious and unconscious sexist comments can take, from shocking statements to those that are more subtle. Additionally, we aim to equip women with the tools to confront the sexism they experience more successfully.

### Study Background

From 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).<sup>1</sup> 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 began taking the survey, and 839 completed enough to provide usable data. As each participant was allowed to submit as many as four comments, 1,750 unique scenarios were reported. Importantly, not all responses were strictly limited to sexist comments; some respondents included sexist situations and behaviors (including nonverbal) as well. From the original study analysis, four major themes emerged: Inequity and Bias, Objectification, Stereotypes, and Undervaluing Women. This brief focuses on the third of these themes: Stereotypes.

### Findings – Comments and Remarks

The analysis of the responses within the Stereotypes theme produced six categories:

1. *Gender stereotypes (general)*: Generalizations about the characteristics and qualities of men and women based solely on their gender.
2. *Women should prioritize homemaker roles*: Comments indicating that women’s highest priorities should be connected to marriage, motherhood, and homemaking.
3. *Women’s internalized sexism*: Sexist beliefs/attitudes held by women about other women or about themselves.
4. *Motherhood penalty*: Situations when women in professional settings are penalized (e.g., loss of opportunity, pay, advancement) once they become mothers.
5. *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.
6. *Double bind/double standard*: Circumstances in which women are expected to exhibit or shun certain behaviors relating to gender stereotypes and are punished when behaving contrary to gender norms.

Table 1 shows a count of the total number of mentions for each category, as well as the percentage representation of the total number of comments (N=1,750). Overall, 69.8% of all comments related to one of the categories under the “Stereotypes” theme. Importantly, many comments were included in several categories, as individual statements were often related to a variety of sexist themes and topics, and there is considerable overlap between categories within this theme.

**Table 1: Stereotypes Categories**

Categories	#	%
Gender stereotypes (general)	388	22.2
Women should prioritize homemaker roles	346	19.8
Women’s internalized sexism	234	13.4
Motherhood penalty	151	8.6
Benevolent sexism	52	3.0
Double bind/double standard	50	2.9
<b>Total Mentions</b>	<b>1,221</b>	<b>69.8</b>

It is interesting to note that the participants who shared comments related to stereotyping were most often white (92.2%), married (75.7%) women with children (69.7%). They also worked full time (76.2%), were 30–39 years old (31.0%), had a master’s degree (37.1%), and were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (68.5%). A supermajority (88.2%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they felt people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it, and 80.9% agreed or strongly agreed that they had personally experienced bias because of their gender. The vast majority (84.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that women need to be prepared to be leaders. And only 7.0% of women agreed or strongly agreed 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 “Stereotypes” theme are found in Table 2.

**Table 2: Stereotypes Commenters (Descriptors and Context)**

Descriptor	Context
Gender of commenter (N=1,192)	Man (65.9%), Woman (32.4%), Other (1.7%)
Relative authority of commenter (N=1,188)	Someone who has/had authority/influence over me (52.9%), A peer [neither authority level] (40.3%), Someone over whom I have/had authority (6.8%)
Approximate age of commenter (N=1,188)	Child or youth (0.6%), 18–25 (9.5%), 26–35 (14.7%), 36–45 (22.5%), 46–59 (36.5%), 60–70 (14.8%), Over 70 (1.4%)
Setting in which comment was made (N=1,190)	Workplace (54.5%), Home/family (11.9%), Church (11.0%), School (9.1%), Community (8.5%), Other (2.9%), Political (2.2%)

**Category 1: Gender Stereotypes (general)**

The Gender Stereotypes (general) category was broad and included comments stereotyping both men’s and women’s behavior. Many general comments were also coded into additional categories under this theme and will be shared later in the brief. There were 388 total comments in this category, and they were most commonly made within the workplace by a man who was between 46 and 59 years old and who was in a position of authority.

*First*, many of the comments in this category revealed negative generalizations about women’s personalities, temperaments, and abilities:

“He said that women were too irrational and emotional to be good legislators and make the difficult decisions that needed to be made.”

“I overheard my supervisor tell the boss once that he wished they didn’t have to hire any women as women ‘just cause drama.’”

“He said, ‘Women shouldn’t be lifeguards because their emotions would inhibit their ability to perform a rescue.’”

*Second*, other comments showed a bias toward qualities typically associated with men, along with the idea that women rarely exhibited those qualities:

“A male friend in my Advanced Theoretical Mechanics class once said to me, ‘You know, I think it’s amazing that someone like you with no inherent ability in physics works so hard and does so well.’ (At the time I was getting an A in the class, and he was getting a C).”

“He said, ‘Women have to be taught to think critically enough to be engineers; it’s against their nature.’”

“A friend from high school maintains that women cannot be leaders because they were not ‘designed that way.’”

“He said, ‘When we hire female programmers, they’re usually not very good.’”

*Third*, a large number of comments in this category focused on types of activities and roles that were deemed appropriate for men but not for women:

“I was assembling some furniture in our home and my son’s friend said, ‘You can’t do that; you’re a girl. You have to wait until your husband gets home.’”

“I asked a young woman to fill up a bucket of water for cooking at a camping activity and an older gentleman said, ‘Let a strong boy do that for you.’”

“She said, ‘We don’t do yard work because that’s a man’s work.’”

“A man at the tire shop told me my tire wasn’t leaking when I took it to be fixed, and I brought it back the next day because it was flat again. He said, ‘Are you sure you don’t want to call your dad or boyfriend so I can explain it to them?’”

*Finally*, some comments demonstrated a tendency to use the female gender as an insult, even when the comment seemed to be veiled as a compliment:

“My boyfriend was driving and got into a lane that was merging with the lane we were in. He said, ‘Gosh, why did I do that?! I feel like such a girl!’”

“He told me, ‘Don’t play like a girl.’”

“In talking to another child, the one boy said to the other, ‘You cry like a girl.’”

“He told me I was pretty good at math for a girl.”

**Category 2: Women Should Prioritize Homemaker Roles**

The second most common category that emerged regarding stereotypes was “Women Should Prioritize Homemaker Roles,” including marriage, motherhood, caregiving, and housekeeping. There were 346 comments in this category, and they were most frequently made within the workplace by a man between the ages of 46 and 59 who had authority over the participant.

*First*, a number of these comments demonstrated the belief that education and employment were simply placeholders for women until they were married and started their “real” lives:

“When I informed a certain man, to whom I had just been introduced, that I was in the process of getting my PhD, his response was ‘You haven’t found a husband yet, huh?’”

“He asked, ‘You’re a pretty girl, so why are you in school? Oh, I know, you’re here to find a partner to get married to.’”

“When in casual discussion with friends, . . . they learned of my non-married status, no children (I was 26 at the time), to which one of the women commented, ‘How can you expect to have a career when you are not even a full woman yet?’”

“A female friend I hadn’t seen since high school came into my workplace. We caught each other up on our lives. Married? Yes. ‘Do you have any kids? Oh, of course you don’t, because if you did you wouldn’t be working here.’”

*Second*, many of the comments in this category promoted the idea that women were well suited for—and should even relish—cleaning, cooking, and similar tasks:

“My husband and I were looking to buy our first house. Our realtor consistently made comments like, ‘You know, it’s really the woman who will decide if she likes the house or not, and it all has to do with the kitchen.’”

“I was told by my father that nobody cleans a bathroom like a woman.”

“A man at church got up to speak about how much he appreciated the people in his life. . . . All he said about his wife was ‘Who would fold my laundry?’”

“He said, ‘I can’t believe you don’t make lunch for your husband.’”

*Third*, another common thread running through this category revealed male commenters’ attitudes that homemaking responsibilities and tasks were not for them:

“He said, ‘I don’t need to help with cooking or cleaning up because there are plenty of women here.’”

“A teacher of a course on marriage said that he didn’t help with housework because he knew how much satisfaction doing housework gave his wife.”

“He said, ‘You need a wife at home (like I have) to do your laundry.’”

“I went to the Capitol and remarked to my representatives that it was frustrating to feel like affordable and accessible childcare and paid parental leave wasn’t taken seriously in a ‘family friendly state.’ They told me that they just don’t think about those things because they’ve always had a wife that stays home.”

*Lastly*, an either/or mentality, meaning that women can either have a career or a family, was present in many of the comments in this category:

“When I was admitted to law school, many male friends questioned my decision as follows, ‘Wait, but don’t you want babies?’”

“He said, ‘She is not qualified to run for Congress. She is a housewife.’”

“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.”

“I was told no woman who had children under the age of 6 had any business being outside the home.”

### Category 3: Women’s Internalized Sexism

The third most common category that emerged from the analysis revealed the sexist beliefs and attitudes held by women about other women or about themselves. All comments that had been made by a woman were included in this category; hence, a wide variety of themes emerged among the comments, and most were also coded into additional categories. Of the 234 individual comments coded into this category, most were made in the workplace by women between the ages of 45 and 59 who were peers.

*First*, a large portion of these comments focused on the “Mommy Wars” (a term that is sexist in itself), meaning the conflict between working moms and stay-at-home moms. It should be noted that survey participants were much more likely than the average Utah woman to be working full time, and only 3.9% of survey participants were at home full time. This likely influenced the large number of negative comments directed at working women reported here:

“A friend said, ‘I would never allow a stranger to raise my kids and send them to daycare. You are choosing to abandon your kids every time you go to work.’”

“She asked me who would be watching my baby and whether or not my husband was supportive of me running for office. I got asked this question *all* the time by women.”

“I was running a craft activity for a local [church] women’s group, and she asked, ‘Oh you are an engineer? Do you work? I’m so sorry. I like to stay home with my kids.’”

“She told me I should be home raising my family instead of working full time and that I was setting up my family to fail.”

“I mentioned that I was leaving to go to Haiti to do some humanitarian work. She said, ‘I’d love to go to other countries like you, but I love my children too much to leave them.’”

*Second*, another subset of comments in this category focused on women whose attitudes seemed to limit women’s capacities in general, conveying low expectations and projecting beliefs that women should stick to traditional feminine roles:

“We were planning a school career fair and a lady who was meaning to be helpful suggested that we include some ‘careers for girls—like cosmetology.’”

“She told me, ‘You’re wasting your potential trying to be a man,’ in regard to my pursuing software engineering.”

“I was organizing a musical program for women in which one of the songs had lyrics indicating a woman could be anything she wanted to be. One of the participants refused to sing the song and asked me to take it out of the program because she didn’t want her daughters to hear things like that. They were meant to be mothers and wives. Period!”

“One woman said this to me at a football game (in complete earnestness): ‘Oh, I just love football. It’s like a microcosm

of life. The women stand on the sidelines and cheer while the men are battling it out on the field.”

*Finally*, some comments revolved around women who felt entitled to judge other women for their life choices:

“A woman I had never met before in my [congregation] came to my home and asked me about my reproductive plans and if I was on birth control.”

“I met a young mother at a wedding. Not even three minutes into the conversation she asked me when I was planning on having kids and then told me that the best thing a mother can do for her child is to be a stay-at-home mom.”

“Every week at church I hear versions of this comment: ‘You need to lose weight so you can get married. Of course, I am saying this with love. You have done so many impressive things. But you might not have to work so hard in those ways if you lost weight and wore some makeup.’”

“I get asked, on a regular basis, who is watching my baby, if I trust the person watching my baby, and if my husband is supportive of me. I have found that other women are, in many instances, my harshest critics. They somehow feel that, because I’m running for public office, it was signaling to them that their decision to stay home was wrong and that I disagreed with their life choices.”

#### Category 4: Motherhood Penalty

There were 151 comments in the “Motherhood Penalty” category, focusing on situations in which professional women were penalized once they became mothers through the loss of opportunities, pay, and advancement. Many of these comments were also coded in the “Women Should Prioritize Homemaker Roles” category, but the workplace penalties mentioned here made these comments worthy of distinct mention. Some participants noted that even though some of these comments and behaviors are illegal, they are still common. Comments in this category were most often made by men in the workplace who were in a position of authority over the participant and who were 46–59 years old.

*First*, despite this phenomenon being known as the “Motherhood Penalty,” women found they were being penalized for being pregnant or merely having the potential to be mothers:

“A male boss said, ‘If you become pregnant, you’ll be asked to resign. If you get married while employed here and don’t get pregnant after a certain amount of time, we’ll meet to determine if this job is stopping you from getting pregnant.’”

“When I was pregnant, I heard this comment from a manager [regarding maternity leave], ‘Man, I wish I could take a four-month paid vacation.’”

“When I was negotiating an increase in pay, my male boss told me that they weren’t sure they wanted to invest in me because ‘I could get pregnant any time.’”

“My male manager said, ‘You are not to be seen by clients while you are visibly pregnant.’”

*In addition*, comments showing discrimination specifically against mothers ranged from subtle to egregious:

“When discussing a possible promotion, my manager said, ‘Don’t you want to spend more time with your family?’”

“The comment was during the job interview: ‘Do you have any kids? Or any reason why you would have to run home during the middle of the day or why you would have to call out sick to take care of them?’”

“My male co-worker said, ‘My wife would do that’ (regarding my leaving a meeting to get a sick kid from school).”

“In a group setting, with multiple external influencers, he said, ‘She’s pregnant so you can’t trust that she cares about us or her children. Women should be in the home taking care of children, and any woman who chooses to work doesn’t care about her kids.’”

“He said, ‘I won’t hire that person because she has young children at home, and I can’t in good conscience support a mother working outside her home.’”

#### Category 5: Benevolent Sexism

The 52 comments in this category highlighted statements or behaviors that undermined or penalized women while being presented in a positive way. The comments ranged from idealizing women, focusing on their appearance, giving backhanded compliments, or withholding opportunities in order to “protect” women from too much stress or responsibility. These comments were most frequently made in the workplace by men who were in a position of authority over the participant and who were 46–59 years of age:

“I was told by a manager, ‘You are really smart for someone as pretty as you are.’”

“In an ad-hoc meeting where I was the only woman, I raised my hand to make a comment. One of the men . . . called on me by saying something about hearing from the best-looking person in the room.”

“I was complimented by a religion teacher for a paper I had written. He said what he loved about me was that I have so many feminine qualities, and in addition to that, I have a great mind.”

“My boss told me directly that he wasn’t considering me for a liaison/committee position at the university where we work that would have responsibilities outside of regular work hours because I was a new mother.”

“At church we are often told, ‘Sisters are more inherently spiritual than men.’”

#### Category 6: Double Bind/Double Standard

Finally, 50 comments reflected the notion that women were expected to behave according to gender stereotypes and

were punished for behaviors that would seem acceptable in men. Women reported that comments in this category were most commonly made in the workplace by men who were in a position of authority and who were 36–45 years of age.

“In my performance review, my boss said, ‘You are smart and capable. However, your direct communication style is seen as abrasive by the other people on the team.’ I was the only woman on the team.”

“I was told by a male manager, ‘As a woman, you are too aggressive.’”

“As I was speaking passionately about something we all should care about, I was told I was being ‘emotional.’ Confusing passion with emotion happens a good deal in the workplace. It’s happened to me more than once.”

“[A male subordinate] and I were discussing leadership roles for employees in our lab. He told me that when I directed employees (assign tasks, make slight corrections for data collection and protocols), it was ‘super bratty.’”

## Findings – Responses

In addition to sharing sexist comments they had heard, study participants were asked to share any response they had made (or wish they had) to the comments. In total, 966 responses were reported to comments in the “Stereotypes” theme, which were coded into the five broad categories shown in Table 3 as well as other responses (eight other designations appear in the [first brief](#) in this series).<sup>2</sup> As with the sexist comments, many responses were coded into several relevant categories, so the category count exceeds 966, and the percent total exceeds 100. Details are found in Table 3.

**Table 3: Stereotypes - Response Major Themes**

Themes & Categories	#	%
Direct Response	499	51.7
No Response	314	32.5
Internal Afterthoughts	230	23.8
Indirect Response	102	10.6
Emotional Response	88	9.1
Other Responses	245	25.4

### Direct Responses

A majority (N=499) of the women’s replies incorporated a direct response to the sexist comment. Some asked the commenter a question, while others provided information or education, offered a rebuttal, or used humor to respond. Examples include the following:

“I was dumbfounded, but mustered up the response of, ‘Since my husband left me to provide for my family, I have found my work very helpful in providing food and shelter for my daughter and myself. I think we would really miss those things.’”

“I responded by pointing out that at least half of Utah’s women will likely be the primary bread winner at some point for their families, so it will be far more valuable to encourage these girls to pursue a higher paying career, regardless of if it’s considered a typically female position.”

“I sarcastically said I left [my children] home by themselves. Then I told her that my husband and I share child rearing responsibilities, and he was home with them.”

“I let him know that there isn’t a universal ideal, and that what is ideal for his family may not be ideal for my family. I encouraged him to be thoughtful about assuming the ‘ideals’ of others, as it could offend. We had a kind and candid exchange and he acknowledged the shortcomings of his comment.”

### 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 32.5% (N=314) of the responses. Participants made statements such as:

“No one said anything, and my female boss gave me a warning look to not say anything back.”

“I retorted that ‘You never know’ and then I walked away. It’s just not worth the fight at church when I have to see them every dang week.”

“I felt I couldn’t say anything. I’m a single mom who doesn’t get child support. My managers and supervisors know this. My life and my child’s life depend on me being able to provide. I confronted my supervisor once and was threatened to be written up for being confrontational in front of other employees.”

### Internal Afterthoughts

Many participants reported responses they wish they had made, once they had time to reflect. These afterthoughts ranged from clever comebacks, to providing information, to wishing they had reported the comment. A total of 23.8% (N=230) of responses related to this theme were coded into this response category. Examples included:

“After the comment, I realized I should have made the argument that we need more women with young children in leadership and that we have to change the culture of what it means to lead.”

“I should have asked whether she knew of any peer reviewed studies that proved my child’s upbringing was inferior because I worked.”

“I wish I had told him it wasn’t his place to . . . give me parenting/financial advice.”

“As a child, I wished over and over that I was a boy. As a teen and young adult, I rejected the role and identity that society defined as feminine. . . . This, in my opinion, is one of the most insidious examples of cultural misogyny. When a girl is raised to hate the fact that she is a girl.”

### 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 the responses grouped into this theme, 10.6% (N=102) were indirect and were generally recognized to be ineffective. For example:

“Many of us in the audience groaned in disapproval or shook our heads, but there was not really a format for combating the comment as he was on an expert panel.”

“Chuckled to myself and moved on because I know my athletic ability as a student-athlete and life-long skier.”

“This was a circumstance where I knew it wasn’t going to have a bearing on me long term (it was a one-off charity project), and therefore I went the ‘pick-your-battles route’ and didn’t bother to object. I did roll my eyes and share smiles with the other women involved.”

### Emotional Response

Next, 9.1% (N=88) of the responses were designated as an emotional response. Women shared that they had felt ashamed, embarrassed, hurt or angry, or wished someone had stood up for them in the moment. Responses included:

“I got angry and had to leave before I cried. I wasn’t even pregnant at the time, nor did I have kids yet, but equating my righteousness and level of faith with whether or not I was willing to give up my career was infuriating.”

“This has led to a lot of mom guilt about leaving my kids at the babysitter.”

“I simply told her that my daughter needed to work to help provide for their family. I silently fumed at her blatant judgment of a situation she knew nothing about. The assumption that women do not belong in the workplace is often supported by women themselves.”

“I was really hurt by this because my degree was something I had worked hard for and felt was very meaningful. The idea that it was pointless in comparison to traditional roles for women really deflated my graduation experience.”

### Other Responses

In addition to the five categories of responses above, eight other types of responses emerged: discussed with others, experienced backlash, proved them wrong, reported to a superior, successful response, third-person response, unsuccessful response, and walked away. In fact, 25.4% (N=245) of responses related to this overall theme included one of the other response areas:

“All his friends jumped him. The other boys were very vocal and disgusted that he was being so prejudiced. They seemed more upset than I was that someone would make such derogatory comments towards girls.”

“Thank goodness for the four other men in the room who couldn’t believe what he had said and quickly retorted with more thoughtful comments.”

“I shut down to be honest. I was so shocked and frustrated that I didn’t respond. Afterward, another member of the group pulled me aside and said how bothered he was by that comment and how he wished I had stood up for myself and others. While I was grateful to not be alone in that frustra-

tion, I was bothered that this individual believed it was my responsibility alone to stand up against comments like that.”

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

“No one reacted at the time (and I did not smile). I later sent him an email to say it was patronizing to me in front of company leaders, and it felt sexist because, in my experience, men are rarely told to smile. He apologized and thanked me for bringing it to his attention.”

“Someone immediately said ‘Hey! That was a sexist put-down!’ And the person making the comment apologized.”

“A friend of mine did confront her boss about this and explained the gender stereotype that was revealed by this behavior. He felt bad and did not realize he was doing that and has tried to change his requests to be more balanced.”

### Conclusions and Recommendations

This brief is the fourth in a series of five related to the UWLP sexist comments research study. The final brief will focus on the theme of “Undervaluing Women,” along with the responses women made upon hearing such comments. The purposes of this series are, first, that 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 better combat the sexism they experience from day to day.

Speaking up against sexism can be a powerful force for reducing gender inequity. Further, being prepared as to how 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, and communities. This will help to strengthen the impact of girls and women so that Utah can become at state in which all Utahns can thrive equally.

<sup>1</sup> 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>

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

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