

Sexist Comments & Responses: Undervaluing Women

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 such comments in Utah. This is the last of five briefs reporting the results of an extensive study on this topic. The study was designed with the intent of collecting and analyzing a wide variety of sexist comments experienced by women across the state in addition to the responses women made (or wish they had) to sexist comments. The goal of the series is to provide education 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 people with the tools to confront more successfully the sexism they experience or witness.

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 series brief).¹ 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 surveys were complete enough to provide usable data. Each participant was allowed to submit up to four comments, and 1,750 unique scenarios were reported. Importantly, not all responses were limited strictly to sexist comments; some included sexist situations and behaviors (including nonverbal).

Four major themes emerged from the data analysis: Inequity and Bias, Objectification, Stereotypes, and Undervaluing Women. This brief focuses on Undervaluing Women.

Findings – Comments and Remarks

The analysis of the responses within the “Undervaluing Women” theme produced five categories:

1. *Undervaluing women’s contributions*: The belief that women are less capable, intelligent, and competent than men solely due to their gender, including holding low expectations of women because of their gender.
2. *Infantilizing/condescending*: Comments in which women are treated as if they are children or otherwise need to

be taken care of, including when men treat women as if they cannot take care of themselves.

3. *Assumed incompetence*: Comments indicating the expectation that women are less competent or capable than men in various areas.
4. *Sexist language/terms*: The use of language that devalues women in a variety of ways.
5. *“Affirmative Action” assumption*: Comments that indicate the speaker believes women only achieved success or position due to a quota or affirmative action policy.

Table 1 shows the total number of mentions for each category, as well as the percentage of the total number of comments (N=1,750). Overall, 50.7% of all comments reported in the study related to one of the categories under the “Undervaluing Women” theme. Many comments were sorted into 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: Undervaluing Women Categories

Categories	#	%
Undervaluing women’s contributions	389	22.2
Infantilizing/condescending	270	15.4
Assumed incompetence	104	5.9
Sexist language/terms	92	5.3
“Affirmative Action” assumption	32	1.8
Total Mentions	887	50.7

Participants who shared comments related to this theme were most often white (90.2%), married (70.3%) women with children (69.7%) who worked full time (76.2%), were 30–39 years old (29.7%), had a bachelor’s degree (37.8%), and were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (64.4%). A super majority (89.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they felt people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it, and 82.0% agreed or strongly agreed that they had personally experienced bias due to their gender. A substantial number (84.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that women need to be prepared to be leaders. Interestingly, only 6.7% 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 provide context for each comment, including the gender, the approximate age, and the relative authority of the commenter, as well as the setting in which the comment was made. Respondents did not provide context for every comment. The results of comment context questions specific to the Undervaluing Women theme are found in Table 2.

Table 2: Undervaluing Women Commenters (Descriptors and Context)

Descriptor	Context
Gender of commenter (N=852)	Man (89.2%), Woman (9.9%), Other (0.9%)
Relative authority of commenter (N=848)	Someone who has/had authority/influence over me (46.6%), A peer [neither authority level] (44.2%), Someone over whom I have/had authority (9.2%)
Approximate age of commenter (N=851)	Child or youth (1.3%), 18–25 (10.0%), 26–35 (14.2%), 36–45 (21.5%), 46–59 (35.6%), 60–70 (15.0%), Over 70 (2.4%)
Setting in which comment was made (N=852)	Workplace (53.5%), School (9.6%), Church (8.7%), Community (7.4%), Political (5.3%), Home/family (11.2%), Other (4.3%)

Category 1: Undervaluing Women’s Contributions

“Undervaluing Women’s Contributions” recorded men insinuating that women are less capable, intelligent, and competent than men solely due to their gender, or that men held lower expectations of women because of their gender. This large category drew 389 (22.2%) comments; most were made within the workplace by a man who was between 46 and 59 years old and was in a position of authority.

First, a large number of comments in this category show the commenters’ tendency to undervalue women’s professional contributions and to see them as less than men’s:

“While my female colleagues and I were on our way to a women’s network meeting, a manager called after us and asked if we’d really just be baking cookies and discussing makeup tips just so we can have an hour away from our desks.”

“I was told that I could participate in a vendor meeting, but I should not comment. If I have information to share, I should talk to my male peer and have him provide my feedback.”

“We were at a senior leader dinner. A man suggested that a *very* senior female leader received her job because another school within our university wanted her husband.”

“I was hired at a local firm where I was the only female. I have a master’s degree, and I was often referred to as the receptionist as a joke because I was the only female.”

“I was in a meeting with executives and was smiling at a text I got about my project. A senior executive said, ‘I know what a smile like that means, you are texting your boyfriend?’ And I said ‘Nope, just got good news about the project,’ and he responded saying, ‘No, you look like you’re texting a boyfriend.’”

“Without fail when we meet someone new, they ask my husband what he does for a living. They never ask me.”

“I recently applied for and received a promotion. On at least three occasions, as I have shared the news with male colleagues, they indicate how they saw the job and thought

about applying but the time wasn’t right, or they didn’t want to commute. The way they say it infers I wouldn’t have gotten the position if they had applied.”

Second, a number of comments showed women being interrupted by men or seeing their contributions go ignored until a man said the same thing, which was then validated:

“I told my boss a few times over a period of over a year that I thought one of our company rules was inconsistent with other policies and did not make sense. He ignored me. The last time I brought it up, another male junior to my position was present, and he said he agreed with me. My boss responded to the junior employee ‘I guess I don’t really have a good reason for it. Let’s change it.’ He ignored my feedback until it came from another man.”

“I shared a great idea in a private meeting with this person, an idea that would benefit the entire team. Directly after that meeting this person met with a man and asked the man to be in charge of implementing the idea.”

“In a [church leadership meeting], I was interrupted a number of times by the same individual even though I had information the bishop had specifically asked for and only I could give (it had to do with a position I held outside of church).”

“I was running for office and approached a man running for a partnership office. He asked me a question about my stance and about five words into my response, he cut me off and started talking over me.”

Finally, other comments show women being undervalued or underestimated in church, school, or family settings:

“I’ve heard the belief that women’s only recognition should come when their children succeeded. Any need for recognition or happiness from anything else was wrong.”

“When I played basketball in college, men who had never played organized basketball would brag about how they could easily beat me just because they were male.”

“I work on thoughtful, thorough, comprehensive policy analysis. The policy area is incredibly nuanced and complicated. A relative in my family describes what I do as, ‘You have some opinions from your heart.’”

“While on a date at BYU Idaho, my date told me that guys are better at communicating and working together than girls because they have served [Latter-day Saint] missions.”

“I had an assignment to research a career that interested me. When I asked my teacher to approve my topic, he looked at it and said, ‘No woman will ever be president. Pick a different topic.’ He handed my paper back.”

“After reading a fiction werewolf story at a conference that I wrote, a young woman said to me, ‘Not a lot of women have successfully written monster stories. So, what made you think you could?’”

Category 2: Infantilizing/Condescending

The second most common category of comments was “Infantilizing/Condescending.” The 270 (15.4%) comments in

this category were most frequently made within the workplace by a man between the ages of 46 and 59 who had authority over the participant.

First, many comments in this category demonstrated a belief that a woman was under the authority of her husband:

“My boss makes comments such as, ‘I can’t believe your husband lets you have such a demanding job,’ and ‘What does your husband think of this?’”

“My husband was approached about a voluntary position I was being asked to do. He would not have any involvement in the role other than supporting me.”

“A door-to-door salesperson responded to my insistence that we did not want their service by asking me when he could come by and talk to my husband.”

“He told me I probably need my domestic partner’s approval to submit for a promotion at work.”

Second, many comments revealed a tendency to treat adult women as if they were children:

“We were in a meeting. I shared an accomplishment and this person said, ‘Our little girl is growing up.’”

“He patted me on the head and called me adorable.”

“When I was Relief Society President, someone in [a church leadership meeting] patted me on the hand and basically told me to be quiet when I was expressing an opinion he disagreed with.”

“My supervisor called my dad and told him how I was doing as an employee (I was about 25 years old at the time).”

“When walking into the office with a gym bag, a male coworker made the comment that it was ‘cute’ that I went to get a ‘little’ workout before work had started.”

Finally, several comments showed an inappropriate use of authority over women, including supposed religious authority in the workplace:

“In a work meeting my boss told me, ‘The way you care too much about people is impacted by your relationship with your Heavenly Father. I can help unpack that for you so you can understand.’”

“A man explained to me (his supervisor) that he was going to ‘allow me’ to do a portion of my job because he prayed about it and God told him to ‘give me a chance.’ This was despite the fact that I was the supervisor, and he couldn’t allow or disallow me to do anything.”

“This man was speaking in a staff meeting of probably 80% women, about how women should be at home raising their children and have no place in the workforce. There were single women, mothers, single moms, married women, etc. He said a woman’s duty is to get married and have children, then stay home to raise them and let the husband work.”

Category 3: Assumed Incompetence

The third most common category that emerged from the analysis demonstrated an attitude or belief that women were incompetent. There were 104 (5.9%) comments in this cate-

gory, and most were made in the workplace by a man between the ages of 46 and 59 who was a peer:

“At school, a peer of mine said that law school grading couldn’t really be blind because women couldn’t have scored in the top 10% otherwise.”

“I said I was a web developer in a social media environment, and a man told me that ‘cutting and pasting a man’s code doesn’t make you a developer.’”

“I was fixing the clutch cable in my car when a man came up and asked me if I needed help. I said I did not. He then told me he’d asked because I was a woman.”

“While taking an oral pop quiz, the teacher said, ‘The next question is an easy one. It is for the girls.’”

Other comments in this category showed surprise from individuals when they learned that women were indeed competent:

“I had a co-worker say it was amazing I could change my own light bulbs in my house.”

“I used to drive Uber/Lyft as a single parent to make some extra money. On more than one occasion I heard men describe how shocked they were that I could drive a manual transmission.”

“He said, ‘I hired a woman, and she is doing a really good job. I never expected this. I might hire more.’”

Category 4: Sexist Language/Terms

There were 92 (5.3%) comments in the “Sexist Language/Terms” category that focused on situations when words demeaned women in a variety of ways. Comments in this category were most commonly made by men in the workplace who were either in a position of authority over the participant or a peer and were 46–59 years old:

“I’ve been called ‘hun,’ ‘sweetheart,’ and even ‘beautiful’ as a greeting from various employees, customers and clients.”

“I was arguing a case before the Utah Court of Appeals when opposing counsel was trying to assert why my argument was incorrect (normal for lawyers) and kept referring to me as ‘little missy.’”

“A manager said, ‘Don’t you worry your pretty little head, I’ve got this.’”

“I had pushed my light to speak during committee and was sitting next to another female legislator and the chair said, ‘I can’t tell which of you girls pushed your light over there.’”

“He said, ‘You want to go to law school? Well, I guess it’s okay if you want to be a lady lawyer.’”

“I followed his advice on a project, and he said, ‘Good girl.’”

“I was waiting for the bus on BYU campus and a professor in a different college asked what I did on campus. I told him I was a graduate student in the Life Sciences, and he said, ‘Oh you’re going to be a science girl!’”

Category 5: “Affirmative Action” Assumption

The speaker’s belief that women achieved success or position based on policy rather than merit arose in 32 (1.8%)

instances. Most were made in the workplace by men who were peers between 46 and 59 years of age:

“During grad school, I had multiple male classmates say I got in because I was a girl or that I wasn’t as qualified as they were because the standards were lower or even that I was taking away a spot in the program from a man who needed to support a family.”

“A man I manage told me, ‘You are not a real executive, you’re just checking a box.’”

“‘Congrats on the affirmative action promotion.’ This comment was made to me by a woman in a somewhat entry-level position after I’d been promoted to Vice President.”

Several comments in this category also reflected “Tokenism,” where women have a seat at the table in order to signal equity, but they were not truly permitted to influence.

“The man said, ‘You are in the meeting because we need a female in the room.’”

“A male manager said, ‘You were hired because we had to add a female, but you broke up our bromance.’”

“I have frequently been brought into meetings for 5 minutes or less and been asked, ‘We need a woman’s perspective on this. What are we allowed to say in this situation?’ And then I leave again. I wish I was invited to the table for having a valid opinion and legitimate experience, not just for a token woman’s opinion to somehow represent all womankind.”

Findings – Responses

In addition to sharing sexist comments they had heard, study participants were also asked to share any response they had made (or wish they had made) to the comments. In total, 783 responses were reported to comments in the “Undervaluing Women” 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).² As with the comments, many of the responses were coded into several response categories, where relevant, so the category count exceeds 783, and the percent total exceeds 100. Table 3 presents details about the responses.

Table 3: Undervaluing Women - Response Major Themes

Themes & Categories	#	%
Direct Response	391	49.9
No Response	240	30.7
Internal Afterthoughts	159	20.3
Indirect Response	104	13.3
Emotional Response	51	6.5
Other Responses	255	32.6

Direct Responses

Around half (N=391) of the women’s replies incorporated a direct response to the sexist comment. Some asked a question to the commenter, while others provided information or

education, offered a rebuttal, or used humor to respond. Examples include the following:

“I said that I thought it was a stupid joke, and I didn’t like it and the way it portrayed women.”

“I had said I was lucky to have gotten a scholarship to a woman mentor of mine a few months before. She had corrected me by saying I had worked extremely hard to earn that scholarship. That interaction led me to know exactly what I wanted to say to this man who thought I was lucky.”

“I said, ‘What I do does not diminish what you have achieved as a mother, and vice versa. We need to get to a place as women that we support each other and are okay with the decisions we have made.’”

“I was bowling on the University of Utah bowling team and just happened to be practicing one day when some men referred to me as a ‘girl.’ Every time I bowled a strike or a spare, I would shout, ‘Look! I’m bowling like a girl!!’ and look directly at the group [of men] and smile. I ended up with a 230+ score. Way to bowl like a girl!!”

“I said, ‘I am 6 feet tall and over 40. There is nothing *little* about me. Why are you talking to me like a tween?’”

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 30.7% (N=240) of the responses. Participants made statements such as:

“I was taken back and didn’t call him on it. It has left a mark on my relationship with him for months that I have not easily gotten past.”

“I usually don’t say anything. It’s sad though that phrases that should be ‘toughen up’ are instead a diss on women or girls.”

“I wish I would have had the guts to say something, but I was too worried about either 1) being way too emotional, 2) being way too rage-filled, or 3) having a target placed on my back.”

Internal Afterthoughts

Many participants reported responses they wish they had made, given time to reflect. Afterthoughts ranged from clever comebacks, to providing information, to wishing they had reported the comment; 20.3% (N=159) of responses were coded into this category. Examples included:

“I was a full-grown woman before I realized that society has conditioned me to not value my own contributions—[to believe] that men are inherently better than women because they are ‘bigger earners.’”

“I wish I had approached my professional life as a leader from the very beginning. I wish I had dismissed the comments and seen myself as their [men’s] equal.”

“With hindsight—I would try to explain that questions dealing with what a woman/person does with their own body is really their own business.”

“I wished that I had stood up for myself and asked them to never speak to another woman who came to buy tires like that again. . . . I didn’t. I just said it was okay and moved on. It wasn’t okay. I’ve never been back to that tire center.”

Indirect Response

In 13.3% of cases (N=104), 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. The indirect responses were generally recognized to be ineffective. For example:

“I let him continue explaining something I already knew, and I did not stop him or call him out.”

“When I spoke, I referred to the women by their titles, hoping people would take the subtle hint. They did not.”

“I think I just vaguely smiled and nodded but I *wish* I had said ‘We usually are just called scientists [not ‘science girls’].”

Emotional Response

Next, 6.5% (N=51) of the responses were designated as an emotional response, where women shared that they felt ashamed, embarrassed, or even hurt or angry, or wished someone had stood up for them in the moment. Some responses included the following:

“I was devastated and said nothing. The meeting ended with the male leader seeming pleased, but I felt disposable.”

“Everyone in the room laughed and thought it was so funny. I tried to make light of it too. It really affected my self-esteem, and it was hard to share what I had to say afterwards.”

“It made me feel unworthy of a man’s love and made me very self-conscious about all that I said and did in a man’s presence when social or romantic. However, no matter how wrong I realized the statement was, it is still a constant whisper in my mind and a belief I have internalized. It’s very hard for me—and I think for a lot of other women—to unlearn these beliefs when they are prevalent and repeated, and when no one is counteracting the statements or beliefs.”

Other Responses

In addition to the five categories of responses above, eight other types of responses arose: discussed with others, experienced backlash, proved them wrong, reported to a superior, successful response, third-person response, unsuccessful response, and walked away. In fact, 32.6% (N=255) of responses counted in this overall theme overlapped with another response area. For example:

“Someone else stood up for me and told them they did not experience me this way. They advocated that the person listen to me and seek out my voice rather than assuming.”

“At the time, I ignored the behavior. When he clearly saw my and others’ discomfort, he stated it wasn’t meant to be sexist. I then asked whether he has nicknames for his male direct reports, to which he had no reply.”

“I just want to be addressed as myself, not my gender or other visible identities that I hold. And if he must acknowledge my gender (for what reason, I can’t fathom), I’m a woman. Not a girl. But saying, ‘Hey woman,’ kind of highlights how ridiculous it is to greet someone with their assumed gender in the first place.”

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:

“After our discussion, the bishop said he could see how a comment like that would be hurtful and vowed to be more aware of his bias.”

“I expressed that I did not prefer to be called ‘gal’ and he never did it again. He never calls anyone else ‘gal’ anymore, either.”

“One of the females on the board challenged him on his email, pointing out to him the work I had accomplished and how he had ignored it. He sent me a long email apologizing for his actions.”

Findings – Final Thoughts

At the end of the survey instrument, participants were invited to share any final thoughts they had about the study, and 329 of respondents contributed. While the majority of the comments were related to thanking the researchers for doing the study and noting that this work was important, a few distinct topics also emerged: 1) sexism has/has not been changing over time, 2) sexism in Utah is/is not different than it is other places, 3) sexism is very common/very rare, 4) religious and cultural factors in Utah strongly influence sexism, and 5) sexist behavior/activity is more subtle than direct and therefore can be hard to identify or combat.

The first distinct topic focused on comments observing that *sexism has or has not been changing over time* (N=23). Eighteen comments indicated things were getting better. For example, “Older generations tend to hold on to old ways more. I tend to see less gender inequality in the younger generations.” Five commenters said things were not getting better. For instance, “I’ve been working in the corporate world for 25 years. Although I love the work, dealing with sexist behavior is exhausting, and it hasn’t improved over time.”

The second topic centered on the notion that *sexism in Utah is or is not different than other places* (N=56). Nine comments indicated that sexism is about the same everywhere; for example, “I have lived in several different states, and I have seen the same amount of sexism in every state.” Three commenters said Utah was better than other places they had lived. One woman stated, “For the most part people in Utah have been very accepting and helpful. I actually come from the northwest and many of the comments are even worse.” Finally, 44 comments indicated sexism is worse in Utah than other places (many of which were strongly worded). For instance, “Utah is downright hostile to women, and men in business environments actively collaborate to sabotage our

chances for advancement and success. One of the biggest regrets I have was moving to Utah.”

A third topic that emerged in the final thought section of the survey related to the notion that *sexism is very common or very rare* (N=52). Thirty-six comments indicated that sexism is very common and pervasive, as evidenced by this comment: “I could write hundreds of comments I have received.” Sixteen commenters said sexism was rare. For example, one woman stated, “I have *never* experienced any form of gender bias. I’m of the opinion that women have equal opportunity and need to quit looking for slights. Work hard, be the best and pull your ‘big girl panties up’ and use your talents & experience.”

Fourth, 44 comments were made regarding *religious and cultural factors in Utah strongly influence sexism here*. The following three comments provide a sampling:

“The overall majority attitude by men and women in Utah is dictated by the cultural beliefs in which residents have been raised.”

“As I have reflected for this survey, I have realized that 90% of all sexist comments made to me were in a church setting.”

“I wish there was some way to uncouple the dominant religious culture from the workplace culture. It causes a great deal of issues for the women in this state because so many people (both women and men) blur the lines between the church and state.”

Finally, the last topic area includes statements related to the observation that *much of the sexist behavior is more subtle than direct* (N=72). Examples include:

“I think a lot of people in Utah, of all genders, are raised not to recognize sexist behavior. I think if you had asked any of the men I discussed in my answers, they wouldn’t think they had said anything sexist.”

“Sexism today is rarely overt. It’s often subtle and goes undetected.”

“The most bias I’ve seen comes from men in leadership who ‘know for sure’ they’re not sexist. It’s this lack of self-awareness that keeps many women suppressed.”

“The sexism I see in Utah tends to be less verbal and more action-based, such as excluding women from meetings, ignoring their input, and discounting their knowledge and abilities.”

“The sexism behind many comments I hear is rarely malicious, but it is very destructive.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

This brief is the final in a series of five related to the UWLP sexist comments research study. The purpose of this brief series is twofold: First, we hope to educate readers on the various ways that language and related behaviors can de-

mean and disempower women, especially for those who may not realize their words are problematic. Second, by showing 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.

Based on the findings of how Utah women experience sexist comments, we offer the following recommendations for women and male allies:

Prepare: In the moment, it can be difficult to think quickly enough to respond. Having a go-to phrase such as “What makes you say that?” can give you time and shifts the focus to the person to explain their thinking.

Take Action: When you hear offensive comments or jokes, push back (preferably within the first two to three seconds). Possible retorts include saying, “Ouch,” or, “We don’t do that here.”

Call Out the Behavior: When you observe a man repeatedly interrupting a woman, or when you see only women being asked to take on “office housework” such as note taking, point it out and offer an alternative.

Speaking up against sexism can be a powerful force for reducing gender inequity. Further, being prepared about 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 hope to reduce the frequency of sexism in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and the state as a whole.

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).

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

Copyright © 2022 Utah Women & Leadership Project