

Sexism:

What Utahns Need to Know

RESEARCH SUMMARY

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

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Sexism and sexist comments are a common but often overlooked form of gender bias that can affect people in workplaces, schools, homes, faith communities, and public settings. Whether intentional or unintentional, these comments reinforce unequal expectations, stereotypes, and assumptions about women and girls. Over time, they can reduce confidence, limit opportunities, and contribute to environments where discrimination and harassment are more likely to occur. Creating communities where everyone is treated with dignity and respect begins with recognizing everyday sexism and understanding its impact.

TYPES OF SEXISM

There are two major categories of sexism. Hostile sexism includes overtly prejudiced attitudes and includes negative stereotypes, ideas, or assumptions about a gender. This can include statements and actions that generalize women as inferior to men, not competent, unintelligent, too emotional, or manipulative. Benevolent sexism is a more subtle, condescending form of sexism that often comes from a good place and includes positive attitudes of gender that can be damaging to individuals (particularly women) and to gender equality.

INEQUITY & BIAS

Many sexist comments reflect unequal assumptions about women's abilities, leadership, and opportunities. In a UWLP study, 37.6% of all reported sexist comments involved inequity and bias. The most common forms included unconscious bias (18.5%), general gender inequity (11.1%), backlash against women's equality efforts (4.7%), and comments related to unequal pay, hiring, and promotion (3.4%). Women frequently described assumptions that they were less qualified, expected to perform traditional support roles, or overlooked for leadership opportunities because of their gender.

DEFINITION

Sexism refers to stereotypes (how we think about), prejudice (how we feel about), and discrimination (how we act toward) others based on their sex.

Sexism can take many forms, some overt and some more subtle. At its core it means treating men and women differently based only on their gender.

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STEREOTYPES

Gender stereotypes were the most common form of sexism identified in the study. Nearly 70% of all reported comments (69.8%) reflected stereotypes about women and men. These included assumptions that women should prioritize marriage, motherhood, and homemaking (19.8%), broad gender stereotypes (22.2%), internalized sexism among women (13.4%), motherhood penalties (8.6%), benevolent sexism (3.0%), and double standards (2.9%). These comments often suggested that women were naturally less suited for leadership, science, or other traditionally male roles, while simultaneously criticizing women who did not conform to traditional gender expectations.

SEXISM

- Is common and often normalized.
- Is rooted in gender bias and stereotypes.
- Is often subtle and appearing benevolent.
- Is harmful even when unintended.

UNDERVALUING WOMEN

Many sexist comments directly minimize women's knowledge, competence, and accomplishments. Half of all reported comments (50.7%) involved undervaluing women through dismissing their contributions (22.2%), treating them as less capable (15.4%), assuming incompetence (5.9%), using demeaning language (5.3%), or suggesting their success resulted only from affirmative action (1.8%). Women frequently described having their ideas ignored until repeated by a man, being mistaken for assistants despite holding leadership positions, or being spoken to in patronizing ways that diminished their expertise.

OBJECTIFICATION

Objectification shifts attention away from a woman's abilities and places it on her appearance or sexuality. 35.7% of all comments in this section involved objectification, including comments about physical appearance (14.3%), sexual harassment (7.0%), sexualizing women (4.9%), and unwanted sexual advances (4.5%). Women described being judged by their appearance, receiving unwanted remarks or advances, or being treated as objects rather than professionals or colleagues.



UNDERRECOGNIZED

Sexist comments are often dismissed as jokes, compliments, or harmless observations, yet they communicate powerful messages about who belongs, who is valued, and who is expected to lead. Across every theme, most participants agreed that people can behave in sexist ways without realizing it.

IMPACT OF SEXISM

Although a single comment may seem insignificant, repeated experiences can have lasting effects. Women reported feeling embarrassed, excluded, frustrated, and less confident after experiencing sexist comments. Many chose not to respond because they feared retaliation or damaging important relationships, particularly when comments came from supervisors or others in authority. Research suggests that increasing awareness, recognizing everyday sexism, and equipping people with effective ways to respond can help reduce gender bias and create more respectful workplaces and communities.

MOVING FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

Reducing sexism begins with recognizing that everyday comments matter. Many sexist remarks are rooted in unconscious bias rather than intentional harm, yet they can still reinforce unequal expectations and limit opportunities. Helping people recognize these patterns, especially subtle forms of sexist behavior, is an important first step toward creating more equitable environments.

Creating respectful communities requires consistent leadership and accountability. Leaders, educators, families, and community members can model respectful communication, challenge harmful stereotypes, and respond thoughtfully when sexist comments occur. Speaking up respectfully can encourage reflection, reduce future bias, and help create cultures where everyone feels valued.

Sexist comments are preventable. By increasing awareness, examining our own assumptions, supporting those who experience bias, and fostering inclusive conversations, Utahns can help build workplaces, schools, families, and communities where everyone has equal opportunities to contribute and thrive.

REDUCING SEXISM IN UTAH

You can help reduce everyday sexism by recognizing harmful comments, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging respectful communication. Learning how bias appears in everyday interactions—and responding thoughtfully when it does—helps create workplaces and communities where everyone feels respected, valued, and included.

Data Sources: UWLP Research & Policy Briefs [No. 38 \(2021\)](#), [No. 39 \(2021\)](#), [No. 40 \(2022\)](#), [No. 42 \(2022\)](#), and [No. 43 \(2022\)](#), and [UWLP White Paper No. 17 \(2025\)](#).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Learn More:** Explore resources in the UWLP Sexism & Utah Context [Resource Kit](#).
- **Review:** Find goals, perceptions, and community partners on the Sexual Harassment & Gender-based Discrimination Spoke [webpage](#).
- **Get Involved:** Connect to the grassroots initiative, [A Bolder Way Forward](#).
- **Take Action:** Help move the needle and discover additional [Calls to Action](#) for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.



Learn to recognize the many forms of everyday sexism, including unconscious bias, stereotypes, objectification, and language that undervalues women.



Speak up respectfully when you hear sexist comments, and support individuals who experience gender bias.



Identify and share policies and practices that can be implemented to help your organization create a culture where all employees can thrive.

Learn more at www.utwomen.org

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