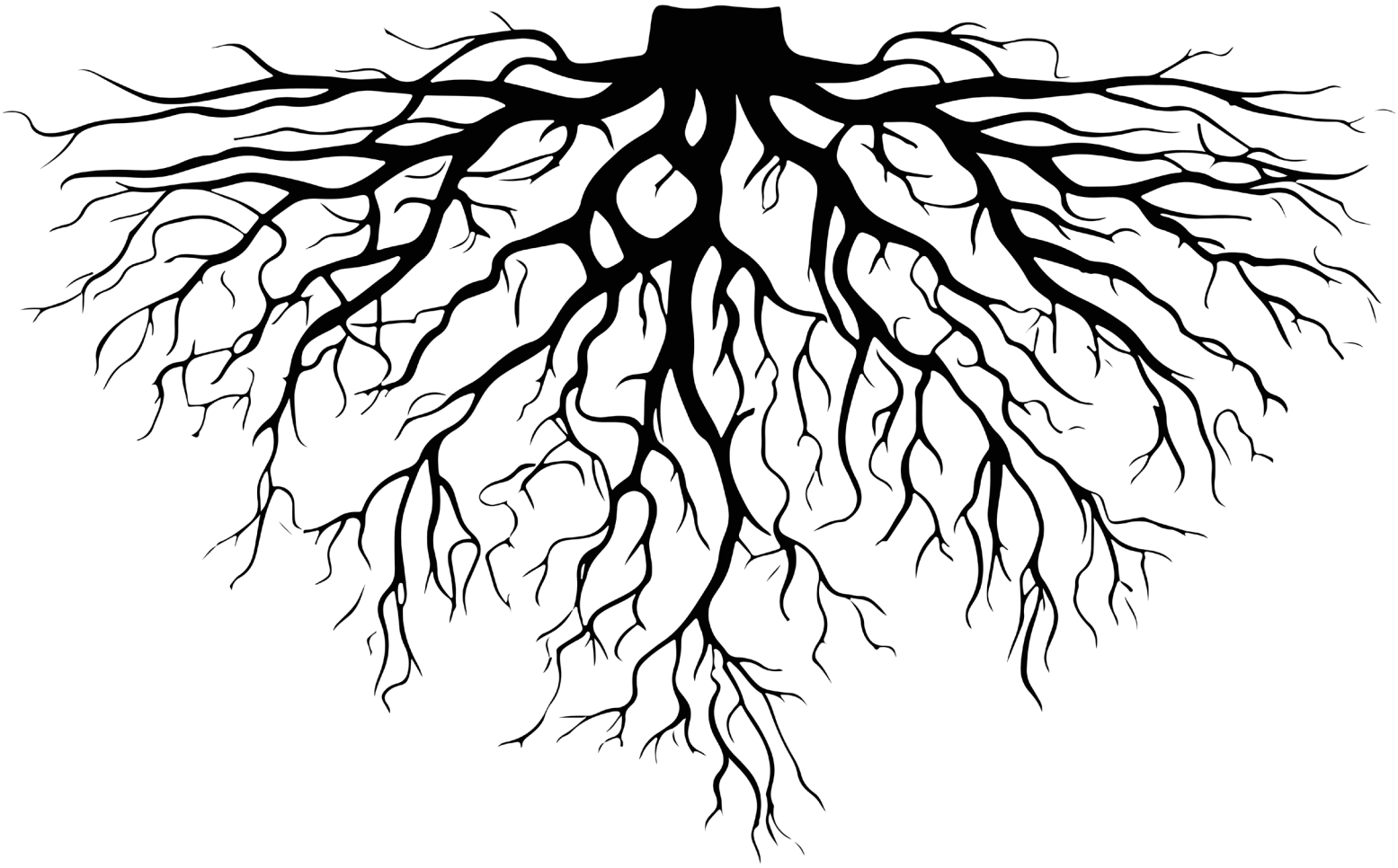

The Roots of Sexual Violence in Utah

A Framework for Understanding Harm

June 23, 2026

WHITE PAPER | No. 26

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

Extension
UtahStateUniversity.

The Roots of Sexual Violence in Utah:

A Framework for Understanding Harm

Susan R. Madsen | June 23, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sexual violence in Utah is not an anomaly, a private tragedy, or the result of individual deviance. It is a patterned, predictable outcome of cultural norms, social systems, and power structures that shape how people understand gender, authority, and worth. Despite Utah's reputation for strong families, close-knit communities, and deep religious commitment, the state continues to report higher-than-national-average rates of rape, child sexual abuse, and other forms of gender-based harm. These realities demand a deeper understanding of why violence persists—and what can be done to prevent it.

This white paper synthesizes decades of national and international research, Utah-specific data, and more than 20 conceptual models to create the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid, a five-tier framework that explains how sexual violence develops, escalates, and becomes normalized. The Pyramid illustrates that violence grows from the ground up: from foundational attitudes and beliefs, to verbal expressions, to harassment and coercion, to sexual assault, and ultimately to lethal violence. These behaviors exist on a continuum, and the lower tiers—often minimized or dismissed—create the cultural conditions in which more severe harm becomes possible.

Key insights from the research include:

- *Attitudes and beliefs matter.* Gender inequality, patriarchal norms, rape myths, and the minimization of women's credibility form the base of the Pyramid and shape the worldview that enables harm. Perceptions precede tangible harm.
- *Normalization is powerful.* When harmful behaviors are excused or dismissed as "just the way things are," communities unintentionally create environments where more serious violations can occur, potentially increasing the possibility of harm.
- *Systems shape outcomes.* Social, cultural, institutional, and religious structures influence whose safety is prioritized and whose voices are believed.
- *Violence escalates.* Microaggressions, boundary-testing, and coercive behaviors are not separate from sexual assault—they are part of the continuum the Pyramid depicts.
- *Silence enables harm*. Shame, stigma, and fear of disrupting social harmony often prevent survivors from reporting and preclude effective community responses. Thus, the harms occur systemically, from individual to community levels.

The report also addresses Utah's unique context. Research shows that highly religious and conservative environments—including many in Utah—can unintentionally reinforce gendered power imbalances, discourage open discussion, and limit access to adequately funded prevention and support resources. Utah's frontline organizations work tirelessly to support survivors, but they do so with limited and inconsistent state funding. These patterns do not arise from malice; they arise from cultural norms that prioritize harmony, forgiveness, and institutional protection over accountability. Understanding these dynamics is essential for prevention.

The white paper also includes a personal faith-based perspective from the author, emphasizing that confronting sexual violence is not a rejection of religious values but an expression of them. Abuse is fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of Jesus Christ and with the moral commitments of most faith traditions. Addressing the roots of harm is therefore an act of discipleship, stewardship, and community care.

Ultimately, this report offers Utahns a shared language and a research-grounded framework for understanding the root causes of sexual violence. It does not blame individuals, families, faith communities, or culture. Instead, it provides a roadmap for prevention—one that requires honesty, courage, and collective action.

Utah can become one of the safest places in the nation for women, children, and families. But only if we are willing to understand where violence comes from, confront the conditions that allow it to persist, and work together to create communities where harm cannot take root.

Introduction

Sexual violence is not an isolated event, a rare tragedy, or the result of individual pathology. It is a patterned, predictable outcome of social conditions—attitudes, beliefs, norms, and systems—that shape how people understand gender, power, and worth.[1] In the decades for which reliable data are available, Utah has consistently reported higher-than-national-average rates of rape,[2] child sexual abuse,[3] and other forms of gender-based harm,[4] while rates of domestic violence remain on par with national level[5]—which themselves are disturbingly high. These realities stand in stark contrast to our state's deeply held values: strong families, close-knit communities, and a culture that emphasizes moral responsibility, service, and care. Yet the data are clear: Utah's family-friendly identity does not protect us from violence. In some cases, the very systems that promote cohesion and belonging can also create conditions where harm is minimized, misunderstood, or silenced.[6]

This white paper is designed to help Utahns understand why. Why do we see elevated rates of sexual violence in a state that prides itself on safety and community? Why do survivors report unique barriers to disclosure, help-seeking, and healing? Why do certain environments—especially highly religious or conservative ones—show both higher rates of violence and fewer publicly funded resources, even though Utah's frontline organizations work tirelessly with limited state investment to provide both prevention and survivor-support services? And why, despite the urgency of this issue, has Utah invested so little in understanding the root causes of sexual violence and supporting the research needed to address it?

---

[1] Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services. (n.d.). *Why sexual violence occurs*. https://aasas.ca/ending-sexual-violence/why-sexual-violence-occurs/; Johnson, P. A., Widnall, S. E., & Benya, R. F. (Eds.). (2018). *Sexual harassment of women: Climate, culture, and consequences in academic sciences, engineering, and medicine*. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/24994/chapter/1

[2] Madsen, S. R., & Clarkson, C. (2026, May 21). *The current status of Utah women & girls: A 2026 research synopsis*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/wp/no-25.pdf; Valentine, J. L., & Miles, L. W. (2022, August 3). *Sexual assault among Utah women: A 2022 update*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/42.pdf

[3] Anderson, K., & Madsen, S. R. (2025, April 3). *Child sexual abuse: What Utahns need to know*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/56.pdf

[4] Madsen, S. R., & Clarkson, C. (2026, May 21).

[5] Wagstaff, C., Leroy, T., Hill, J. C., Hopkin, C., & Darowski, E. S. (2023, March 1). *Domestic violence among Utah women: A 2023 update*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/46.pdf

[6] Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence. (2022). *Nurturing the spiritual development of children in the early years: A contribution to the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being. Booklet VII: Guide for religious and spiritual leaders.* https://childspiritualdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Booklet-7_Guide-for-Religious-and-Spiritual-Leaders-WEB.pdf; Kaur, N., & Thalwal, H. (2024). Impact of cultural factors on women's reporting of sexual assault. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, *5*(10), 4439–4448. https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V5ISSUE10/IJRPR34357.pdf

The answers are not simple, but they are knowable. And understanding is essential if we hope to prevent harm and build a safer future for women, girls, and all Utahns.

Although this report focuses primarily on women and girls—because they experience sexual violence at disproportionately higher rates—men and boys are also harmed. Clearly, all human experiences matter deeply, and the patterns described in this report apply to everyone. However, the decision to center women in this white paper reflects the scope of the available research and the urgency of Utah's gender-based disparities, not a dismissal of the harm experienced by male survivors.

Across the United States, scholars and practitioners increasingly recognize that sexual violence exists on a continuum—from attitudes and jokes to coercion, assault, and even homicide.[7] The dozens of models and hundreds of articles and reports reviewed for this white paper share a common insight: violence grows from the ground up.[8] It begins with beliefs about who matters, who is valued, and who is entitled to power. It escalates through verbal expressions, harassment, coercion, and finally physical and sexual violence.[9] As one source noted, "sexual violence is a physical expression of underlying attitudes and beliefs,"[10] and those beliefs are shaped by the broader social environment—our expectations, our traditions, and the messages we receive about gender, relationships, and responsibility.[11]

Utah's context makes this especially urgent. Research shows that religious and conservative environments often have fewer resources, more stigma, and stronger norms around silence, purity, forgiveness without accountability, and family preservation.[12] These norms can unintentionally create conditions where survivors feel responsible for the harm done to them, where perpetrators are protected, and where communities struggle to recognize early warning signs.[13] As many sources used in this report suggest—and one states plainly—"sexual violence is not about sex; it is about power and control,"[14] and that power is shaped by long-standing patterns in our communities, including gender inequality, rigid expectations for men and women, and cultural norms that tend to privilege men's authority.[15]

At the same time, Utah's communities are filled with people who care deeply about protecting children, strengthening families, and living their values. This white paper is written for them—for educators, nonprofit leaders, faith communities, policymakers, and everyday Utahns who want to understand the roots of harm so they can help prevent it.

---

[7] Chechak, D., & Csiernik, R. (2014). Canadian perspectives on conceptualizing and responding to workplace violence. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, *29*(1), 55–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/15555240.2014.866474; Muslim Women Australia. (2023). *Saving FACE: Faith & cultural empowerment: A guide for reframing the way forward*. https://mwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SavingFACE-Sector-Guide-Online.pdf

[8] Etengoff, C., & Lefevor, T. G. (2021). Sexual prejudice, sexism, and religion. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *40*, 45–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.08.024

[9] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020). Injunctive norms, sexism, and misogyny network activation among men. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, *21*(1), 124–138. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000217

[10] University of Calgary. (n.d.). *Ask First: The facts*. https://ucalgary.ca/student-services/ask-first/facts

[11] le Roux, E., & Pertek, S. I. (2023). *On the significance of religion in violence against women and girls*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003169086

[12] Wilkins, N., Tsao, B., Hertz, M., Davis, R., Klevens, J. (2014). *Connecting the dots: An overview of the links among multiple forms of violence*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/elder-abuse/communication-resources/connecting_the_dots-a.pdf; Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence. (2022); Kaur, N., & Thalwal, H. (2024).

[13] Sheldon, J. P., & Parent, S. L. (2002). Clergy's attitudes and attributions of blame toward female rape victims. *Violence Against Women*, *8*(2), 233–256. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778010222183026

[14] Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services. (n.d.).

[15] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020); Etengoff, C., & Lefevor, T. G. (2021).

We cannot change what we do not understand. And Utah cannot reduce its violence rates without a shared framework for how harm develops, escalates, and becomes normalized. The models and academic literature reviewed in this report reveal several consistent truths:

- *Attitudes and beliefs matter.* They shape behavior, silence survivors, and provide the justification that allows violence to take root.
- *Normalization is powerful.* When harmful behaviors are minimized or treated as "just the way things are," communities create environments in which more serious harms are tolerated.
- *Systems shape outcomes.* Power structures—social, cultural, institutional, and religious—directly influence the drivers of violence and determine whose safety is prioritized.
- *Violence escalates.* Thoughts, words, microaggressions, and boundary violations are not separate from sexual assault; they exist on the same continuum of harm.
- *Silence enables harm.* When communities minimize, excuse, or ignore early signs of violence, the likelihood of escalation increases.

These insights are not abstract. They help explain why Utah's abuse and violence rates remain high despite strong families and religious cohesion. They help us understand why survivors often struggle to report, why shame is so pervasive, and why prevention efforts must address not only individual behavior but also cultural norms and systemic inequities.

This report goes deeper than any previous publication in Utah. It synthesizes models of sexual violence, decades of research, and Utah-specific data to create a comprehensive framework for understanding the roots of harm in our state. It does not blame families, faith communities, or culture. Instead, it offers a clear, research-based explanation of how violence develops—and how Utah can interrupt it.

> *The goal is simple:* To give Utahns the knowledge they need to prevent harm, support survivors, and build communities where women and girls can thrive.

This white paper is a tool, a roadmap, a shared language, and, most importantly, an invitation—to understand, to care, and to act.

Author's Perspective & Faith Context

Before introducing the research methodology and framework for understanding harm, as noted in the title of this white paper, I want to share my positionality around this work. Although I receive many expressions of gratitude for the reports and resources we provide to Utah leaders and residents at the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP), I also occasionally hear concerns from individuals who believe that our research is meant to undermine the state or even my own faith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church). That is not the case. I am deeply committed to my faith and have been throughout my life. I was raised by parents who served in the Church Educational System, and I served a full-time mission in Tampa, Florida, at age 21. My upbringing taught me both the doctrines of the Church and the responsibility to use my voice in ways that strengthen our congregations and communities. I also rely deeply on a personal sense of calling from God.

The Latter-day Saint Church—like most faith traditions—condemns abuse in every form. The Church states clearly that "the Lord condemns abusive behavior in any form—including neglect and physical, sexual, or verbal abuse. Most abuse violates the civil laws of society."[16] Church doctrine further teaches that "abuse in any form is sinful, tragic, and in total opposition to the teachings of the Savior." At the same time, research is clear that communities with stronger patriarchal norms tend to experience more problems with misuse of power, coercion, and sexual violence. Recognizing these patterns is not an attack

[16] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (n.d.). *Preventing and responding to abuse.* https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/abuse-how-to-help/preventing-and-responding-to-abuse

on faith; it is an effort to protect individuals and strengthen families—goals that align with the teachings of the gospel.

My understanding of abuse is also shaped by the teachings of the New Testament, which consistently reject the attitudes and behaviors that cause harm. The King James text teaches that relationships must be rooted in love, honor, and gentleness—not domination or cruelty. Paul instructs, "Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them" (Colossians 3:19), and warns parents not to provoke or discourage their children (Colossians 3:21). The Savior's followers are told to put away "bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking" (Ephesians 4:31) and to be "kind one to another" (Ephesians 4:32). Peter adds that husbands must give "honour unto the wife" (1 Peter 3:7), and James teaches that anger and explosive behavior are incompatible with God's will (James 1:19–20). Perhaps most clearly, Paul's description of Christlike love—patient, kind, not easily provoked, and never seeking to harm (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)—leaves no room for abusive behavior of any kind. These teachings make it clear that abuse is not only harmful—it is fundamentally incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yet, as decades of research make clear—and as this white paper will establish—faith-based communities often contain many of the upstream conditions that allow sexual violence to take root, including patriarchal norms, gender inequity, male privilege, sexism, and traditional gender roles. These patterns do not arise because people are malicious; they arise because cultural and religious systems can unintentionally reinforce power imbalances and discourage open discussion. As I wrote in my *Utah News Dispatch* commentary, violence against women is "one of the most silenced social issues,"[17] and that silence is often driven by discomfort, fear of disrupting social harmony, and the desire to protect institutions from reputational harm. When violence "hits close to home"—inside families, congregations, and trusted circles—communities often shut down rather than confront the possibility that respected individuals may be responsible. These dynamics help explain why patriarchal environments, including some faith-based settings, can become vulnerable to misuse of power and sexual abuse. This is a hard truth for many to hear, but avoiding it only deepens the silence that allows harm to continue.

In many organizational and social-change frameworks,[18] raising awareness is the essential first step toward meaningful transformation. The same is true for reducing sexual violence: we cannot change what we refuse to see. Silence does nothing to protect individuals or communities—if anything, it allows abuse to deepen and escalate. Faith-based congregations offer countless positive benefits, and that is one reason I remain actively engaged in my own religious community. Yet to become more Christlike—as individuals and as congregations—we must be willing to confront the roots of sexual violence, including the cultural and structural factors that allow it to persist. The same expectation applies to every faith community, regardless of tradition. At the same time, people who do not identify with a particular faith or spiritual tradition are equally essential partners in this work. Whether grounded in religious conviction, humanistic values, or commitment to justice and dignity, the responsibility is the same: to face hard truths, to resist the impulse toward silence, and to create environments where harm cannot take root.

As I have written elsewhere,[19] silence often takes hold because the truth is uncomfortable, because people fear disrupting what they perceive to be social harmony, or because acknowledging harm feels like a threat to the institutions they love. Avoiding difficult topics is not the answer. Tackling complex subjects that affect people's lives and their safety directly, with courage and compassion, is the only way forward. If we want our faith communities—and all our communities—to be safer and more aligned with our highest values, whether those values are rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, another faith tradition, or

---

[17] Madsen, S. R. (2026, January 7). Why Utah still can't confront violence against women. *Utah News Dispatch*. https://utahnewsdispatch.com/2026/01/07/why-utah-still-cant-confront-violence-against-women/

[18] Crutchfield, L. R. (2018). *How change happens: Why some social movements succeed while others don't*. Wiley; Kotter, J. P. (2012). *Leading change*. Harvard Business Review Press.

[19] Madsen, S. R. (2026, January 7); Madsen, S. R. (2026, February 16). How Utah's faith communities can help end violence against women. *Utah News Dispatch*. https://utahnewsdispatch.com/2026/02/16/how-utah-faith-communities-can-help-end-violence-against-women/

a secular moral framework, we must be vigilant and honest, willing to address the conditions that allow abuse to take root.

I have felt the call to write this white paper for several years, but it is a difficult topic, and I have postponed the writing more than once. I knew the information would be hard for many to hear, and that many would disregard it. Yet if we do not learn where violence is coming from, we cannot do better. Can we build a society that is both deeply religious and also one of the safest places in the nation for women, children, and families? That is the question we face. I believe the answer is yes—but it will require honest work and collective courage. If we truly care about our daughters, granddaughters, sisters, neighbors, and friends, then we must lean in, learn what is happening, and understand our part in shifting the conditions that allow violence to persist. I often ask when I speak: Why are we not moving heaven and earth to protect our children and families? Learning and taking action can begin now. Violence and abuse thrive in darkness. The light of intelligence and right action, fueled by courage and honesty, allows us to vanquish violence and create a culture that sustains all its members.

Methodology & Research Methods

This white paper is a conceptual research synthesis, not a traditional empirical study. Its purpose is to integrate decades of scholarship, national and international models, Utah-specific data, and emerging research on gender-based violence into a single, coherent framework that explains how sexual violence develops, escalates, and becomes normalized, particularly in Utah. The analysis is informed by a broad body of literature—including academic articles, national surveillance reports, conceptual models, practitioner frameworks, and Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) publications—but only a subset of these sources is cited directly in this paper.

While sexual violence affects people of all genders, the research base that informs this white paper—and Utah's most persistent disparities—centers on women and girls. Men and boys also experience sexual abuse, assault, and coercion, and their experiences deserve attention. However, the conceptual model developed here reflects the patterns most consistently documented in the literature on gender-based violence against women.

The methodology follows a multi-stage, integrative literature review. First, I conducted a broad scan of existing sexual violence models—including frameworks used in public health, education, and community prevention. These models were compared to identify shared assumptions, consistent pathways of escalation, and common underlying drivers, such as gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and cultural attitudes that normalize harm.

Second, I reviewed empirical research across psychology, sociology, public health, criminology, and gender studies. This includes, but is not limited to, studies on hostile and benevolent sexism, rape myth acceptance, coercive control, harassment, sexual assault, and lethal violence. While only a subset of these sources is cited directly in this white paper, the broader body of research informs the conceptual framework. Many of these studies provide explicit evidence that attitudes and beliefs at the base of the model—introduced in the next section—predict verbal expressions, harassment, coercion, and assault, confirming the continuum of harm described throughout this paper.

Third, I examined religious and cultural literature, including global interfaith resources, analyses of spiritual abuse, and studies of clergy responses to domestic and sexual violence. This broader body of work helps explain how faith communities—an essential dimension of Utah's landscape—can function on a continuum of protective to risk-producing environments. While only a portion of these sources is cited directly in this white paper, the full set informs my ongoing research agenda, including a forthcoming study and additional work in this space.

Fourth, where appropriate, I incorporated Utah-specific data from UWLP snapshots and white papers on rape, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, and the status of women and girls. These sources highlight the state's consistently high rates of sexual violence and the cultural, religious, and demographic factors that shape survivors' experiences.

Across all sources, I used a thematic, cross-model analysis to identify recurring patterns, including foundational attitudes and beliefs that legitimize inequality, verbal expressions that externalize and normalize those beliefs, harassment and coercive behaviors that assert control, sexual assault as a direct violation of autonomy, and lethal violence as the extreme end of the continuum. This process allowed me to construct the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid, a conceptual model that synthesizes the strongest and most consistent evidence across fields.

In summary, this white paper does not present new primary data. Instead, it offers a research-grounded conceptual framework designed to help Utahns understand the root causes of sexual violence and the cultural conditions that allow it to persist. Its strength lies in integration: bringing together diverse bodies of research to create a shared language and a clear, accessible model for prevention, policy, and community action.

Pyramid Overview

I began by conducting a broad scan of existing sexual-violence models across multiple sectors—including higher education, nonprofit advocacy, public health, and community-based organizations. Although these frameworks differ in language and emphasis, they share several core insights: sexual violence develops along a continuum; early attitudes and norms shape later behaviors; and systems of inequality create the conditions in which harm becomes normalized. To ground the development of the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid, I reviewed 20 representative models from these diverse domains, ranging from social-media-based frameworks to peer-reviewed scholarly analyses. A summary of these models and their categorization is provided in Appendix A. Each model's categories, components, and underlying assumptions were examined for relevance and alignment with the Utah context.

Drawing on this broad literature base—and informed by my decades of research on the status of Utah women and girls, as well as the cultural, religious, and structural factors that shape gendered experiences in the state—I synthesized the strongest, most consistent evidence into a single conceptual framework. The result is the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid, a five-tier model that illustrates how attitudes, norms, and behaviors can escalate from subtle expressions of inequality to the most severe forms of gender-based harm. See Figure 1 for a quick visual of the model, displaying only the names of each tier (more detail follows in the subsections below).

The Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid is intentionally structured as an escalating continuum, illustrating how seemingly minor or socially tolerated behaviors create the conditions in which more severe forms of harm can occur. The lower tiers—rooted in foundational cultural norms that legitimize inequality and justify entitlement and in outward verbal behaviors that reinforce power, degrade, or test boundaries—form the broad base upon which more overt violations rest. As behaviors move upward through the Pyramid, they become increasingly direct, coercive, and harmful, progressing into coherent clusters of escalating behaviors that assert control, create fear, or violate autonomy; they may lead to direct violations of bodily autonomy through force, coercion, or incapacitation. Ultimately, at the top of the Pyramid are the most extreme outcomes: gender-based violence resulting in death, including abuse-related suicide. Taken together, the tiers demonstrate that sexual violence does not emerge in isolation; it is enabled, reinforced, and escalated through interconnected attitudes, expressions, and behaviors that accumulate over time.

A brief description of each tier follows.

- Tier 1 (Attitudes & Beliefs): Foundational cultural norms that legitimize inequality and justify entitlement.
- Tier 2 (Verbal Expression): Outward verbal behaviors that reinforce power, degrade, or test boundaries.
- Tier 3 (Harassment & Coercion): A coherent cluster of escalating behaviors that assert control, create fear, or violate autonomy.
- Tier 4 (Sexual Assault): Direct violations of bodily autonomy through force, coercion, or incapacitation.

- Tier 5 (Lethal Violence): The most extreme forms of gender-based violence resulting in death and includes abuse related suicide.

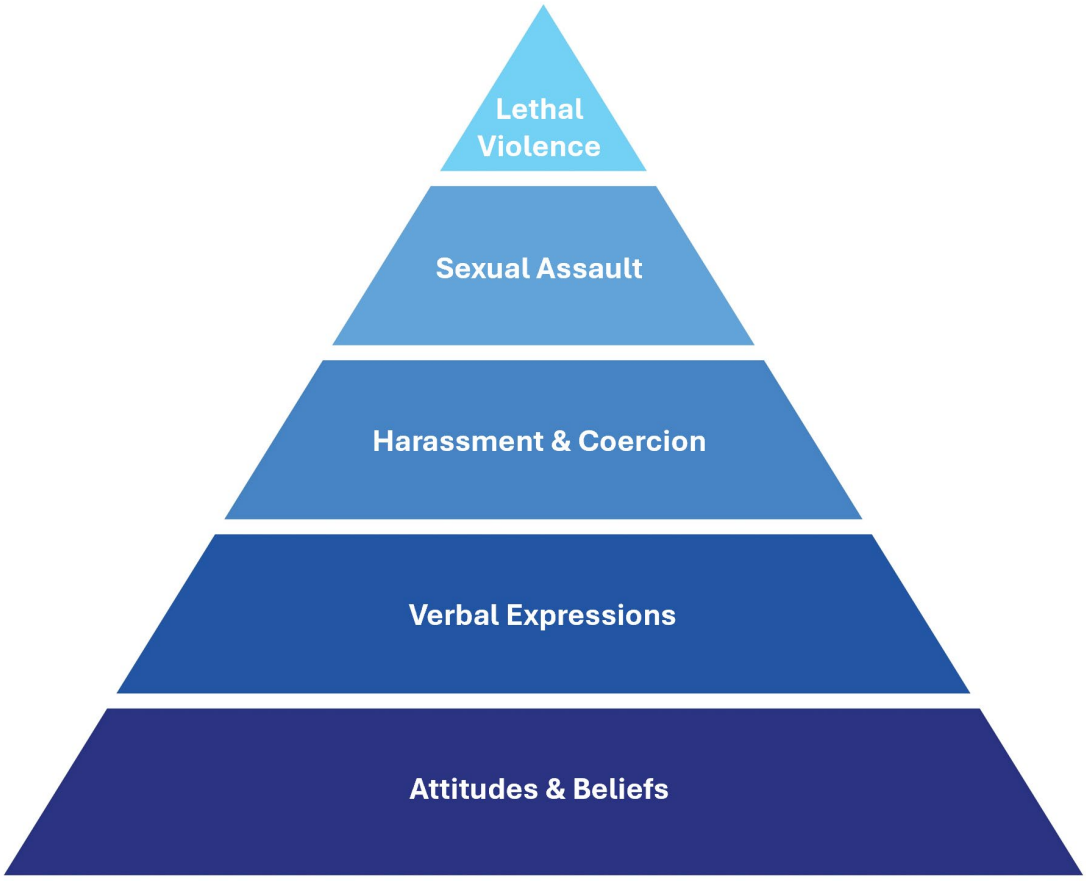

Figure 1. The Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid: A 5-Tier Framework

Note that the presence of Tier 1 attitudes and beliefs does not mean an individual will inevitably progress to higher tiers. Most people who hold traditional or inequitable gender beliefs will never perpetrate sexual assault or other forms of violence. However, the reverse is consistently true: individuals who commit sexual assault almost always do so within a broader context of underlying attitudes, norms, and beliefs that legitimize inequality and justify entitlement. These foundational patterns do not cause violence on their own, but they create the cultural conditions in which boundary-testing behaviors are tolerated, coercive actions become normalized, and severe forms of harm are more likely to occur. In this way, the Pyramid illustrates both the non-deterministic nature of individual behavior and the very real pathways through which cultural norms enable escalation.

In the following sections of this white paper, I provide details for each of the five tiers, along with the key elements within them—specific attitudes, expressions, or behaviors that exemplify the type of harm represented at that level.

I. Attitudes & Beliefs (Tier 1)

The foundational tier of the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid is Attitudes & Beliefs. This tier appears consistently across nearly all models reviewed in the literature scan conducted for this project; it is not unique to the Utah framework but is instead a well-established component supported by decades of research. This tier reflects foundational cultural norms that legitimize inequality and justify entitlement. It encompasses the underlying stereotypes, assumptions, and cultural norms that position women as less credible, less autonomous, or less deserving of power and respect. These internalized or socially

reinforced beliefs normalize gender inequality and create the worldview that makes higher-tier behaviors possible.

In this model, Tier 1 includes 13 elements; each represents a specific pattern of thinking or cultural expectation that contributes to the broader foundation of inequality. These elements—such as benevolent sexism, gender-based stereotypes, patriarchal norms and practices, rape myths and misconceptions, sexual objectification, misogyny, male privilege, and not believing women—are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Together, they form the cultural base that shapes perceptions of gender, power, and entitlement (see Figure 2). In Utah, these foundational beliefs are further shaped by very conservative approaches to sex education, which often limit open discussion about healthy relationships, bodily autonomy, and consent; as a result, many young people lack the knowledge needed to distinguish healthy sexual behavior from coercive or harmful behavior.

Figure 2. Elements of Tier 1 – Attitudes & Beliefs

The 13 elements within Tier 1 are far more than a list of terms. Each represents a well-documented cultural pattern that research has shown to contribute to the broader foundation of inequality on which higher-tier behaviors can develop. Rather than operating in isolation, these elements reinforce one another, shape social norms, and create environments in which boundary-testing behaviors are tolerated and more severe forms of harm become possible. I recognize that several of these terms may feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar for some Utah audiences, particularly for individuals who have spent much of their lives within the cultural norms these concepts describe. However, these terms are directly grounded in the national and international research literature and maintaining alignment with that evidence base is essential for accuracy and integrity. Discomfort is not the goal, but it is often a first step and a necessary part of confronting and shifting long-standing cultural patterns in Utah.

To support clarity and shared understanding, each Tier 1 element is defined below.

1. **Benevolent Sexism:** Subjectively positive but patronizing beliefs that idealize women as pure, fragile, morally superior, and in need of men's protection, guidance, or provision. These attitudes typically reward women who conform to traditional gender roles, reinforce male dominance, and justify gender inequality under the guise of being caring or chivalrous.
2. **Gender Inequality:** The unequal distribution of power, resources, opportunities, and credibility between women and men, maintained through cultural norms, institutional practices, and social expectations. These disparities position men as the default holders of authority and privilege while limiting women's autonomy, safety, and full participation in society.
3. **Gender-Based Stereotypes:** Widely held cultural beliefs that assign fixed traits, roles, and behaviors to women and men, based solely on gender. These assumptions present gender differences as natural or inevitable, reinforce male dominance and female subordination, and create expectations that justify unequal treatment and entitlement.
4. **Hostile Sexism:** Overtly negative beliefs about women that portray them as manipulative, untrustworthy, sexually deceptive, or intent on undermining men. Such attitudes frame women as adversaries and legitimize male dominance, aggression, and punishment toward women who are perceived to be stepping outside traditional gender roles.
5. **Male Privilege:** The unearned advantages, benefits, and social freedoms that men receive simply because they are male—often privilege is so taken for granted that it becomes invisible. Male privilege grants men greater credibility, safety, autonomy, and access to power; at the same time, it normalizes women's disadvantage and reinforces gender hierarchy.

6. **Misogyny:** A system of beliefs, attitudes, and cultural norms that devalues, distrusts, or expresses hostility toward women, positioning them as inferior, less credible, or less deserving of respect, autonomy, and safety. It polices women's behavior, reinforces male dominance, and justifies mistreatment—ranging from everyday disrespect to harassment, coercion, and violence.
7. **Not Believing Women:** A culturally embedded assumption that women's reports of harm, discomfort, boundary violations, or violence are exaggerated, unreliable, or untrue. This bias delegitimizes women's experiences, protects perpetrators, and reinforces gendered power hierarchies by treating women's voices as inherently less credible than men's. In Utah, disbelieving women is often reinforced by a persistent cultural stereotype that young women may falsely report rape to conceal consensual sexual behavior, a narrative that increases shame, undermines credibility, and discourages disclosure.
8. **Other Discriminatory Attitudes:** Prejudicial beliefs about people based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, class, religion, or other social identities that reinforce hierarchies of worth and entitlement. These attitudes normalize dehumanization, justify unequal treatment, and create cultural conditions in which violence, domination, and disregard for others' autonomy are more easily tolerated.
9. **Patriarchal Norms and Practices:** Cultural systems that position men as the default holders of authority, credibility, and power while assigning women subordinate roles in families, communities, and institutions. These norms legitimize male dominance, normalize gender hierarchy, and create expectations that men are entitled to lead, control, and make decisions—including over women's bodies, voices, and opportunities.
10. **Rape Myths & Misconceptions:** Culturally embedded beliefs that deny, minimize, or distort the reality of sexual violence by shifting blame onto victims, excusing perpetrators, or framing assault as inevitable or misunderstood. These assumptions normalize gender inequality and can create the conditions that manifest in higher-tier behaviors of sexual violence. In Utah, these myths are reinforced by the absence of affirmative-consent standards[20] and by cultural narratives that equate silence or non-resistance with consent, despite research[21] showing that many victims freeze and are unable to say "no" during an assault.
11. **Sexual Objectification:** Viewing or treating women primarily as bodies or sexual objects rather than as full human beings with thoughts, agency, and autonomy. This belief reduces women to their physical appearance or sexual usefulness, legitimizes unequal treatment, and creates cultural permission to disrespect, harass, and violate women.
12. **Tolerance and Justification of Beliefs & Behaviors:** Cultural attitudes that excuse, minimize, or rationalize gender-based harm by framing problematic actions as normal, harmless, deserved, or unavoidable. These beliefs legitimize inequality, protect perpetrators, and create social permission for behaviors that degrade, control, or violate women.
13. **Traditional Gender Roles:** Culturally prescribed expectations that men and women should occupy distinct, unequal roles—men as leaders, providers, and decision makers, and women as caregivers, supporters, and dependents. These norms present gender hierarchy as natural or moral, reinforcing male authority, female subordination, and male entitlement to control.

---

[20] Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault (UCASA). (n.d.). *You are a survivor.* https://www.ucasa.org/_files/ugd/04e045_764700ff63d04a90809586a3f6eb8488.pdf; Overson & Bugden, PLLC Law Offices. (n.d.) *How does Utah law define consent in sexual assault cases?* https://www.utahcriminallaw.net/how-does-utah-law-define-consent-in-sexual-assault-cases/

[21] Navarro Silvera, S. A., Goldfarb, E. S., Birnbaum, A. S., & Lieberman, L. D. (2026). Is it rape or consent? College men just don't know. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *23*, 38. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph23010038; Zinzow, H. M., & Thompson, M. (2019). Beliefs about consent and sexual assault perpetration in a longitudinal study of college men. *Violence and Victims*, *34*(3), 548–565. https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.VV-D-18-00014

Across all 30 articles, the evidence is clear: Tier 1 is not a list of 13 separate constructs but a single, interconnected ideological root system. Patriarchal norms form the deepest taproots; traditional gender roles and gender inequality function as the thick lateral roots that extend their reach; hostile and benevolent sexism, misogyny, male privilege, and sexual objectification operate as the feeder roots that absorb and circulate these beliefs; and rape myths, victim blaming, not believing women, and tolerance or justification emerge as the fine root hairs that draw these ideas into everyday interpretation and judgment. Together, these interconnected roots form the subterranean system from which sexual violence grows—demonstrating that the harm visible above ground is sustained by the dense network of beliefs and norms beneath it.

II. Verbal Expressions (Tier 2)

The second tier of the Pyramid is Verbal Expressions. As with Tier 1, this tier in some form or another also appears consistently across nearly all models reviewed in the literature scan conducted for this project. Although Tier 2 is not unique to the Utah framework, it is a well-established component supported by decades of research. This tier reflects outward verbal behaviors that reinforce power, degrade women, or test personal boundaries. Unlike Tier 1—which captures underlying beliefs—Tier 2 captures the spoken or written expressions that make those beliefs visible and socially reinforced. Tier 2 is the beginning of concrete manifestation that can escalate through the higher tiers. These verbal behaviors signal, normalize, and communicate gendered power imbalances, creating an environment in which disrespect, dismissal, and boundary-testing become tolerated, even normalized.

In this model, Tier 2 includes nine elements; each represents a specific verbal action or expression that contributes to the broader cultural conditions in which inequality and harm can escalate. These elements—such as catcalling, sexist comments and jokes, victim blaming, name-calling, microaggressions, rape jokes, and comments about or shaming of women's bodies—are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Together, they form the verbal landscape that shapes perceptions of women's credibility, worth, and autonomy (see Figure 3).

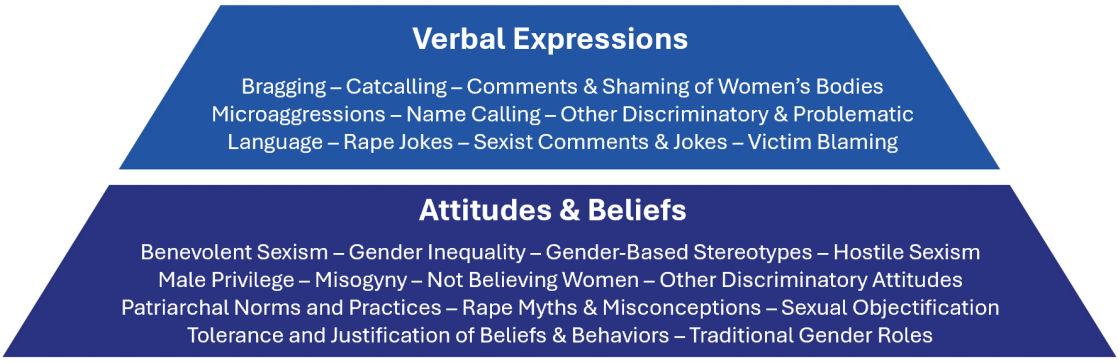

Figure 3. Elements of Tier 2 – Verbal Expressions

The nine elements within Tier 2 are far more than a list of problematic phrases or isolated comments. Each represents a recognizable verbal pattern that research has shown to reinforce gendered power dynamics and contribute to the broader cultural conditions in which higher-tier behaviors can emerge. Rather than functioning independently, as with Tier 1, these expressions accumulate and interact, shaping social norms, signaling what is tolerated, and creating an environment in which disrespect, dismissal, and boundary-testing become normalized. Because Tier 2 captures the outward expression of the beliefs embedded in Tier 1, these verbal behaviors play a critical role in making inequality visible, socially reinforced, and more difficult to challenge. To support clarity and shared understanding, each Tier 2 element is defined below.

1. **Bragging:** Verbal boasting about sexual exploits, conquests, or behaviors that demean, pressure, or objectify women. These statements celebrate dominance, normalize disrespect, and signal that treating women as objects or trophies is socially acceptable and even admirable.
2. **Catcalling:** Refers to unsolicited, sexualized, or intrusive comments, noises, or gestures directed at women in public or semi-public spaces. These verbal behaviors assert dominance, reduce women to sexual objects, and communicate that women's bodies are available for public evaluation and male attention.
3. **Comments & Shaming of Women's Bodies:** Verbal remarks that judge, criticize, sexualize, or police women's physical appearance, clothing, weight, or body shape. These comments reinforce the idea that women's bodies exist for public evaluation; they normalize disrespect and pressure women to conform to restrictive beauty and behavior standards.
4. **Microaggressions:** Subtle, everyday verbal remarks or behaviors that communicate disrespect, dismissal, or stereotyped assumptions about women. These comments often appear harmless or unintentional, yet they reinforce gender inequality, undermine women's credibility, and signal that women's experiences, expertise, or boundaries are less valued.
5. **Name Calling:** The use of insulting, demeaning, or gendered labels to belittle, shame, or undermine women. These verbal attacks reinforce stereotypes, assert dominance, and signal that disrespect toward women is acceptable or deserved.
6. **Other Discriminatory and Problematic Language:** Verbal remarks that demean, stereotype, or marginalize people based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, class, or other identities. These comments normalize disrespect, reinforce social hierarchies, and create environments where dehumanization and unequal treatment are tolerated.
7. **Rape Jokes:** Verbal statements that use sexual violence as humor, entertainment, or casual commentary. These jokes trivialize the seriousness of rape, normalize harm, and signal that sexual violence is acceptable, exaggerated, or not worth taking seriously.
8. **Sexist Comments & Jokes:** Verbal expressions that demean, stereotype, or trivialize women through humor, insults, or casual remarks. These statements normalize disrespect, reinforce gender hierarchy, and signal social acceptance of attitudes that devalue women's intelligence, autonomy, bodies, or contributions.
9. **Victim Blaming:** Verbal statements that fault a woman for the harm she experienced by suggesting she caused, provoked, or failed to prevent the violence. These comments shift responsibility away from the perpetrator, reinforce shame and self-doubt, and signal that women's safety depends on their behavior rather than on others' accountability.

III. Harassment & Coercion (Tier 3)

Tier 3 represents the point in the Pyramid where behaviors shift from verbalized disrespect to actions that assert control, create fear, or violate autonomy. While Tier 1 captures underlying beliefs and Tier 2 captures the verbal expressions that make those beliefs visible, Tier 3 marks a qualitative escalation: the movement from words to behavioral intimidation. As with the first two tiers, this tier is widely recognized across national and international models of gender-based violence and is strongly supported by decades of research documenting how harassment and threats function as mechanisms of power, coercion, and fear.

Unlike Tier 2—where harmful beliefs are communicated through speech—Tier 3 encompasses behavioral patterns that pressure, monitor, isolate, or intimidate women. These actions may or may not involve explicit verbal threats; many operate through implication, surveillance, or coercive control. What unites them is their impact: they restrict a woman's sense of safety, autonomy, and freedom of movement. These behaviors signal a willingness to escalate and often serve as precursors to physical or sexual harm.

In this model, Tier 3 includes a cluster of behaviors such as stalking, gaslighting, intimidation, controlling behavior, digital harm, non-consensual exposure, sexual harassment, isolation, and various forms of verbal and nonverbal threats. Each represents a distinct mechanism through which fear, pressure, or dominance is exerted. Together, they form a coherent system of harassment and coercion that narrows a woman's choices, undermines her credibility, and increases her vulnerability to higher-tier violence (see Figure 4).

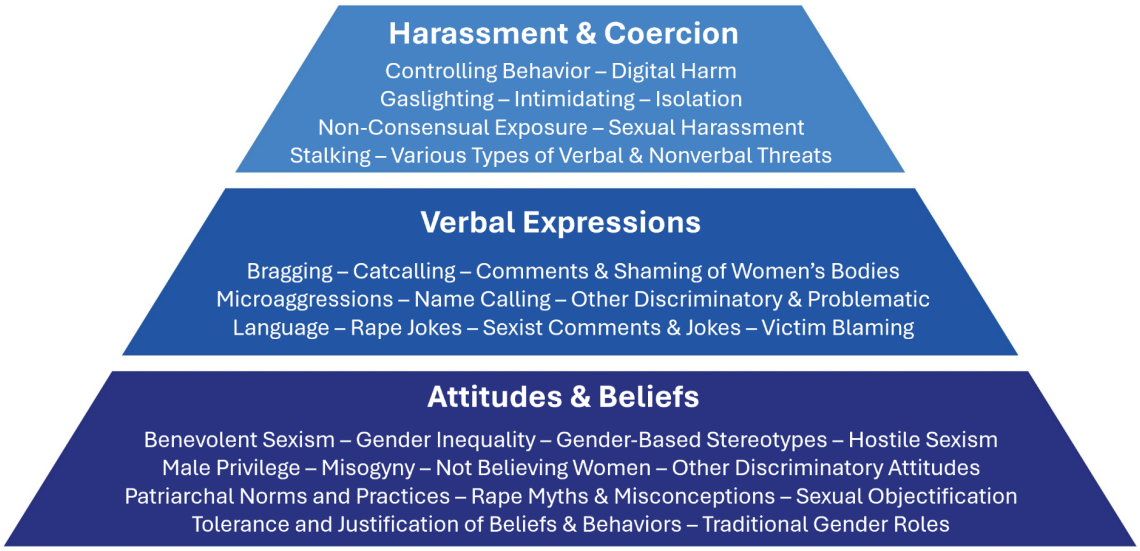

Figure 4. Elements of Tier 3 – Harassment & Coercion

The nine elements within Tier 3 are not isolated incidents but interacting behavioral patterns that shape and restrict a woman's lived environment. Research shows that these behaviors often co-occur, reinforce one another, and escalate over time. For example, digital monitoring may accompany controlling behavior; intimidation may be paired with gaslighting; stalking may follow earlier verbal threats. These patterns collectively create a climate of fear and constraint that limits autonomy long before physical violence occurs.

Because Tier 3 represents the behavioral escalation of the beliefs (Tier 1) and verbal expressions (Tier 2) that precede it, this tier plays a pivotal role in the Pyramid. It is the point at which harmful attitudes and normalized verbal disrespect become actionable harm—a shift that dramatically increases risk. To support clarity and shared understanding, each Tier 3 element is defined below.

1. **Controlling Behavior:** Actions that restrict, monitor, or manipulate a woman's choices, time, relationships, or autonomy. These behaviors assert dominance, create dependency or fear, and signal that her freedom is subject to someone else's authority or approval.
2. **Digital Harm:** Behaviors that use technology to monitor, harass, threaten, or violate a woman's privacy or boundaries. These actions include unwanted contact, surveillance, manipulation, or exposure through digital platforms, normalizing intrusion and creating fear or loss of control in online spaces.
3. **Gaslighting:** Behaviors that distort, deny, or manipulate a woman's experiences, memories, or perceptions to create confusion, self-doubt, or dependence. These actions undermine her confidence in her own reality and signal that her perspective, credibility, and autonomy can be dismissed or rewritten.
4. **Intimidating:** Behaviors that use fear, pressure, or implied threats to control a woman's actions, silence her responses, or limit her autonomy. These actions create an environment of danger or unease and signal that resistance may lead to retaliation or harm.
5. **Isolation:** Behaviors that separate a woman from her support systems by limiting access to friends, family, community, information, or resources. These actions increase dependence, reduce outside perspective, and signal that her connections and autonomy can be controlled or removed.
6. **Non-Consensual Exposure:** Behaviors that show, share, or display sexual content, images, or body parts without a woman's consent. These actions violate privacy, create fear or humiliation, and signal that her boundaries and dignity can be disregarded for someone else's power or gratification.
7. **Sexual Harassment:** Unwanted sexualized behaviors, comments, or attention that create discomfort, intimidation, or a hostile environment for women. These actions assert power, violate

boundaries, and signal that women must tolerate disrespect or sexualization to avoid conflict or retaliation.

8. **Stalking:** Repeated, unwanted monitoring, following, contacting, or surveillance that causes a woman to feel unsafe, watched, or threatened. These actions invade privacy, erode autonomy, and signal that her movements, routines, and safety are being controlled.
9. **Various Types of Verbal & Nonverbal Threats:** Spoken or unspoken behaviors that imply harm, punishment, or negative consequences in order to control, silence, or intimidate a woman. These actions—whether explicit or subtle—create fear, restrict autonomy, and signal that boundary-setting will be met with retaliation.

IV. Sexual Assault (Tier 4)

Tier 4 represents the point in the Pyramid where behaviors escalate from intimidation and coercive control to direct violations of bodily autonomy through force, coercion, or incapacitation. While Tier 1 captures underlying beliefs, Tier 2 captures the verbal expressions that make those beliefs visible, and Tier 3 captures the behavioral intimidation that restricts autonomy, Tier 4 marks a profound shift: the movement from fear-based control to physical and sexual harm. This tier, as with the other tiers, is consistently recognized across national and international frameworks as a core component of gender-based violence and is supported by extensive research documenting how sexual assault functions as both an outcome of earlier tiers and a mechanism of domination in its own right.

Unlike Tier 3—where behaviors pressure, monitor, or intimidate—Tier 4 encompasses acts that physically invade, violate, or exploit a woman's body. These actions may involve force, manipulation, coercion, incapacitation, or the exploitation of power imbalances. What unites them is their impact: they override consent, eliminate autonomy, and inflict profound physical, emotional, and psychological harm. Tier 4 behaviors do not merely signal a willingness to escalate—they *are* escalation.

In this model, Tier 4 includes behaviors such as uninvited touch, sexual coercion, rape, drugging, exploitation, and physical or emotional abuse. Each represents a distinct mechanism through which bodily autonomy is violated and power is exerted. Together, these behaviors form a cluster of sexual and physical violations that directly harm women and often occur after earlier patterns of control, intimidation, or harassment have already been established (see Figure 5).

The elements within Tier 4 are not isolated acts but part of a broader continuum of violence. Research shows that sexual assault frequently emerges in contexts where earlier-tier behaviors—such as controlling behavior, threats, or stalking—have already normalized fear, strengthened dependency, or diminished autonomy. Research with anonymous male respondents further demonstrates that sexual aggression often follows a predictable social script rather than occurring spontaneously. As O'Sullivan and Ronis noted, "The process itself can be understood as adapting a shared social script … that typically involves these elements: identifying, isolating, intimidating, pressuring or overcoming a target who does not want or consent to sex, often within a social context that includes peers aware of what is happening."[22] This pattern mirrors the escalation described in the Pyramid: behaviors in Tier 3 create the conditions—through isolation, pressure, and intimidation—that enable the physical violations that occur in Tier 4.

For example, sexual coercion may follow emotional abuse, uninvited touch may escalate into assault, and drugging may be used to facilitate rape. These patterns demonstrate how Tier 4 violations are often embedded within ongoing dynamics of power and control rather than occurring as spontaneous or disconnected events.

[22] O'Sullivan, L. F., & Ronis, S. T. (2026). Isolate, inebriate, intimidate, repeat: High rates of sexual force against women are reported when young men are given anonymous surveys. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605261432630

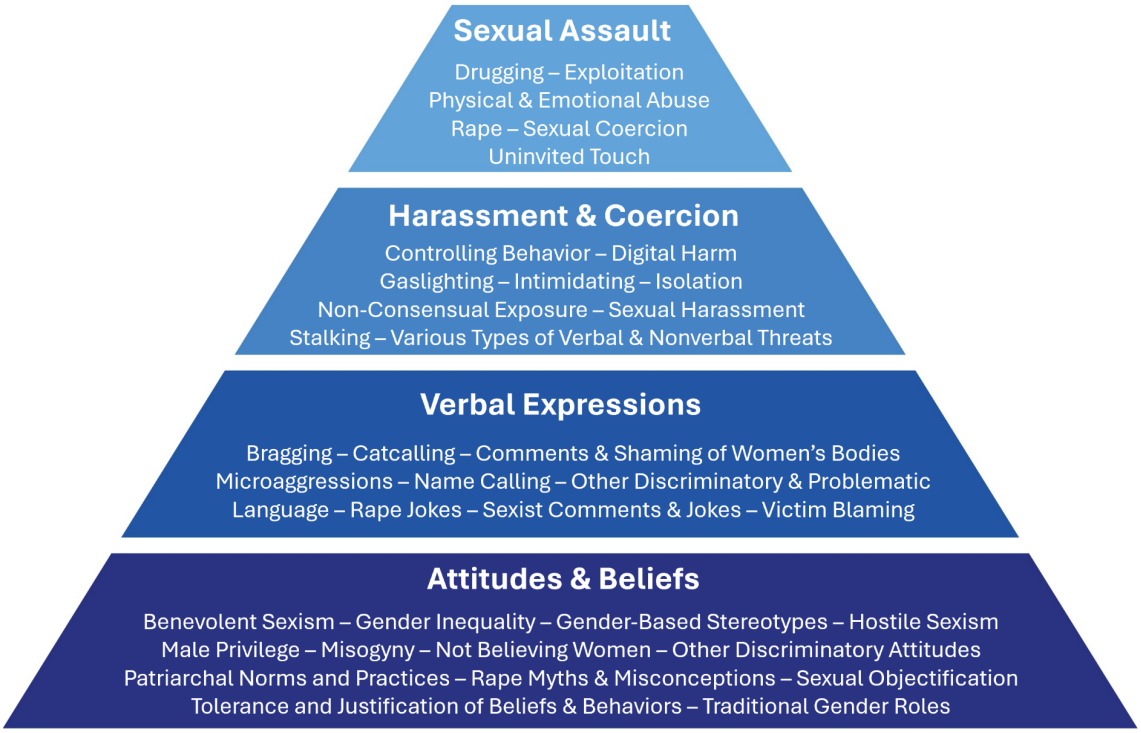

Figure 5. Elements of Tier 4 – Sexual Assault

Understanding consent is essential to understanding sexual assault. Utah does not currently use an affirmative-consent standard,[23] and research shows that many victims "freeze" or become immobilized during an assault, making it impossible to resist verbally.[24] In these cases, the absence of a verbal "no" is often misinterpreted—or deliberately framed—as consent. This dynamic is frequently exploited in legal defenses that characterize sexual assault as a "misunderstanding," despite extensive evidence that freezing is a common trauma response and that consent must be freely, affirmatively, and continuously given.

Because Tier 4 represents the direct physical manifestation of the beliefs (Tier 1), verbal expressions (Tier 2), and behavioral intimidation (Tier 3) that precede it, this tier plays a critical role in the Pyramid. It is the point at which gendered power imbalances translate into explicit bodily harm—a shift that carries severe and lasting consequences. To support clarity and shared understanding, each Tier 4 element is defined below.

1. **Drugging:** Giving a woman alcohol, medication, or other substances without her knowledge or in amounts intended to impair her awareness, judgment, or ability to consent. These actions deliberately remove her capacity to make autonomous decisions and create conditions in which further violation can occur.
2. **Exploitation:** Taking sexual advantage of a woman by using power, vulnerability, manipulation, or unequal circumstances to obtain sexual contact or compliance without her freely given consent. These behaviors leverage imbalance—not choice—and occur when a woman's ability to refuse, resist, or leave is compromised.
3. **Physical & Emotional Abuse:** Actions that inflict harm, fear, or psychological domination through force, aggression, humiliation, or sustained emotional manipulation. These behaviors

[23] During multiple committee hearings (2021–2024) on proposed consent-definition bills, advocates testified: "Most victims freeze and cannot say 'no.' Utah's current law does not reflect this reality." Utah Legislature, Judiciary Committee testimony on consent-definition bills (multiple sessions, 2021–2024).
[24] Navarro Silvera, S. A., Goldfarb, E. S., Birnbaum, A. S., & Lieberman, L. D. (2026); Zinzow, H. M., & Thompson, M. (2019).

directly violate a woman's safety and autonomy and are often used to punish resistance, enforce compliance, or maintain control in the context of sexual coercion or assault.

4. **Rape:** Utah law defines rape as sexual intercourse without consent, including situations in which a person is unable to consent because of incapacitation caused by physical, cognitive, neurological, or intellectual conditions (Utah Code §76-5-402). Any sexual penetration is sufficient to constitute the act, and the law applies regardless of marital status.
5. **Sexual Coercion:** Using pressure, manipulation, intimidation, or incapacitation to obtain sexual contact or compliance without freely given consent. These behaviors override a woman's autonomy by exploiting fear, guilt, power imbalances, or impaired ability to resist or refuse.
6. **Uninvited Touch:** Any physical contact with a woman's body that occurs without her clear, voluntary, and freely given consent. These behaviors violate personal boundaries, create fear or discomfort, and assert power or entitlement over her physical autonomy.

V. Lethal Violence (Tier 5)

Tier 5 represents the highest and most devastating point in the Pyramid—the point at which gender-based violence results in death. While Tier 1 captures the foundational attitudes that legitimize inequality, Tier 2 externalizes those beliefs through verbal expressions, Tier 3 escalates into behavioral intimidation and coercive control, and Tier 4 manifests as direct violations of bodily autonomy, Tier 5 marks the most extreme outcome: lethal violence, including homicide and abuse-related suicide. As with the other tiers, this one is consistently recognized across national and international frameworks as the gravest expression of gendered power and control.

Unlike Tier 4—in which harm is enacted through physical or sexual violation—Tier 5 encompasses acts or conditions that end a woman's life. These outcomes may occur through direct homicide, fatal injury, or the cumulative effects of prolonged abuse that lead to suicide. What unites these forms of lethal violence is their root in the continuum of attitudes, norms, and behaviors that appear in the lower tiers. Tier 5 is not an aberration; it is the far end of a predictable escalation when earlier warning signs are ignored, minimized, or normalized.

In this model, Tier 5 includes gender-based homicide, intimate partner homicide, honor-based killings, and abuse-related suicide. Each represents a catastrophic breakdown of safety, autonomy, and protection. Together, these outcomes illustrate the most severe consequences of unchecked coercive control, escalating threats, and repeated violations of bodily autonomy (see Figure 6).

The outcomes within Tier 5 are not isolated tragedies but part of a broader continuum of harm. Research shows that lethal violence is almost always preceded by patterns found in earlier tiers—controlling behavior, stalking, threats, sexual assault, and escalating physical or emotional abuse. For example, intimate partner homicide is strongly associated with prior coercive control; abuse-related suicide often follows prolonged emotional degradation and isolation; and honor-based killings that occur in various parts of the world emerge from rigid patriarchal norms that devalue women's autonomy. These patterns demonstrate that Tier 5 outcomes are deeply embedded within ongoing dynamics of power, domination, and fear.

Because Tier 5 represents the ultimate manifestation of the beliefs (Tier 1), verbal expressions (Tier 2), behavioral intimidation (Tier 3), and violations of bodily autonomy (Tier 4) that precede it, this tier underscores the urgency of prevention at every level of the Pyramid. Lethal violence is the most visible and devastating endpoint of gender-based harm, but it is also the most preventable—when communities recognize and intervene in the earlier tiers. Tier 5 does not include a formal list of elements, but examples such as gender-based homicide, intimate partner homicide, honor-based killings, and abuse-related suicide illustrate the extreme outcomes that can emerge when escalating patterns of control, coercion, and violation go unchallenged.

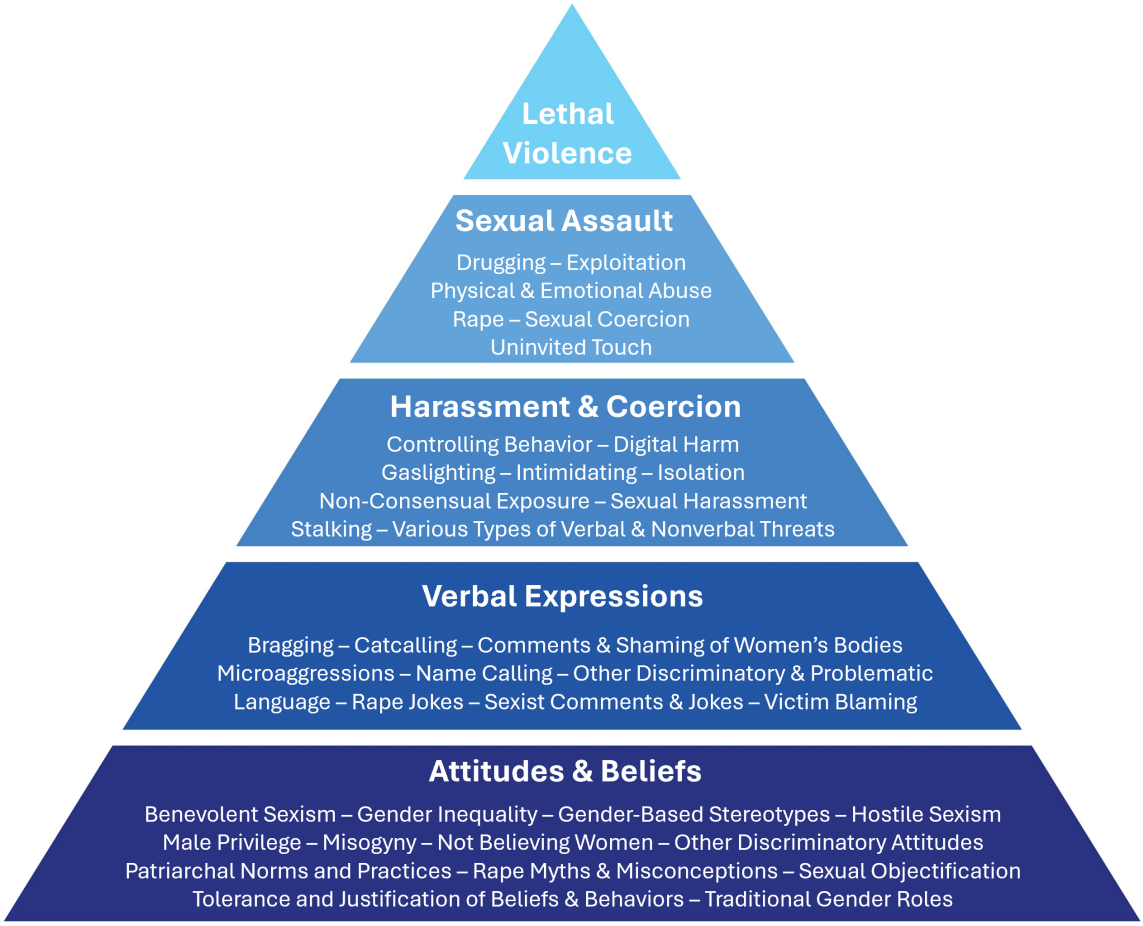

Figure 6. Tier 5 – Lethal Violence

Connections Among Elements Within Tiers

Understanding sexual violence requires more than focusing on individual behaviors. It includes seeing how those behaviors connect and build on each other over time. Although hundreds of articles and other resources were reviewed for this report, I narrowed the evidence base to 30 sources for this section and the next to demonstrate how the literature supports the connections among elements within the Pyramid tiers. The representative articles present clear evidence that the elements within each tier of the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid do not stand alone. Instead, they form clusters of beliefs, words, and actions that reinforce one another. These patterns share common roots and follow predictable paths as they escalate. This section examines these connections one tier at a time, showing how the elements within each level form linked patterns that reinforce and enable one another. Because this section addresses the foundational evidence behind connections among elements within the Pyramid, it is intentionally more scholarly in tone and includes a high density of source citations to demonstrate the strength and credibility of this information.

I. Attitudes & Beliefs (Tier 1)

The 30 articles selected for this section analysis support a strong consensus: the 13 elements within Tier 1 do not function as isolated attitudes. Instead, they form a reinforcing network of beliefs that shapes how individuals and communities understand gender, power, and entitlement. Rather than operating as independent ideas, these constructs are closely linked and have been shown to correlate across many studies, cultures, and research methods. From the literature, six main themes emerged that highlight how strongly the Tier 1 elements connect to one another.

Patriarchal Norms as the Root System: The strongest and most consistent finding across the literature is that patriarchal norms and practices, where men are the default holders of authority in a community, form the base from which all other Tier 1 constructs grow. Angelone et al. stated that "rape myths are a by-product of patriarchal society,"[25] while Swim and Campbell described patriarchal gender hierarchies as the cultural soil that supports nourishes all sexist attitudes.[26] Structural studies confirm this pattern: Kearns et al. found that states with higher gender inequality indexes also report higher rates of sexual violence, showing that large-scale patriarchal systems shape individual-level beliefs and behaviors.[27] Kombo similarly identified gender-based violence as emerging from "inequalities, discrimination, roles, disparities, or expectations based on gender."[28] Taken together, these findings show that patriarchal norms are not one construct among many—they comprise the core belief system (i.e., ideological root) that anchors all elements of Tier 1.

A Core Cluster of Interlocking Beliefs: Four constructs consistently appear together across the literature: hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, traditional gender roles, and gender-based stereotypes. These form the core attitudinal cluster of Tier 1. Angelone et al. linked them directly, noting that sexism is rooted in beliefs about "gender-appropriate roles,"[29] while Swim and Campbell showed that gender stereotypes—both descriptive ("what women are") and prescriptive ("what women should be")—provide the basic foundation for both hostile and benevolent sexism.[30] Gutierrez and Leaper's meta-analysis gives the strongest evidence: hostile sexism correlates with violence-against-women attitudes and benevolent sexism.[31] Across more than a dozen studies within the 30 analyzed for this section (e.g., Bosson et al.;[32]

---

[25] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021). Does sexism mediate the gender and rape myth acceptance relationship? *Violence Against Women*, *27*(6–7), 748–765, p. 750. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220913632

[26] Swim, J. K., & Campbell, B. (2003). Sexism: Attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In R. Brown & S. L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of social psychology: Intergroup processes* (pp. 218–237). Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470693421.ch11

[27] Kearns, M. C., D'Inverno, A. S., & Reidy, D. E. (2020). The association between gender inequality and sexual violence in the U.S. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *58*(1), 12–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2019.08.035

[28] Kombo, B. K. (2024 November 25). *From survivor centred to survivor led: Lessons from promising survivor-led gender-based violence accountability initiatives*. Irish Consortium on Gender-Based Violence, p. 3. https://www.gbv.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ICGBV-Survivor-Led-Accountability-Paper-1-2.pdf

[29] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021). p. 750.

[30] Swim, J. K., & Campbell, B. (2003).

[31] Gutierrez, B. C., & Leaper, C. (2024). Linking ambivalent sexism to violence-against-women attitudes and behaviors: A three-level meta-analytic review. *Sexuality & Culture*, *28*, 851–882. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10127-6

[32] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020).; Bosson, J. K., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., Kuchynka, S. L., & Schramm, A. T. (2015). A dangerous boomerang: Injunctive norms, hostile sexist attitudes, and male-to-female sexual aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, *41*(6), 580–593. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21597

Hammond et al.;[33] Hill & Marshall;[34] LeMaire et al.;[35] Persson & Dhingra;[36] Sanchez-Ruiz et al.;[37] Younas et al.[38]), these constructs are measured and discussed together as linked parts of the same belief system. They function as the main branches growing directly from patriarchal norms.

Rape Myths, Victim Blaming, and Not Believing Women as Downstream Outputs: A second cluster—rape myths, victim blaming, and not believing women—appears consistently as the result of the core sexist belief system. Angelone et al. showed that sexism leads to rape myth acceptance,[39] while Payne et al.'s Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS) showed that rape myths group together with sexist attitudes and traditional gender roles.[40] Hill and Marshall found that hostile sexism predicts both rape myth acceptance and victim blaming across cultural contexts,[41] and LeMaire et al. showed how these beliefs shape women's own labeling of their assaults.[42] Moscatelli et al. also showed a step-by-step pattern: internalized sexualization → sexism → harassment myths → skepticism toward assault allegations.[43] These findings confirm that disbelief of women is not a standalone attitude—it is the predictable outcome of the entire Tier 1 network.

Misogyny, Male Privilege, and Sexual Objectification as Reinforcing Mechanisms: Another set of constructs—misogyny, male privilege, and sexual objectification—function as forces that strengthen the Tier 1 system. Bosson et al. showed that hostile sexism activates a "misogyny network,"[44] while Swim and Campbell identified misogynistic stereotypes as the outward expression of sexist hostility.[45] Tompkins and Lynch cited Objectification Theory, showing that sexual objectification feeds into sexist beliefs and rape myth acceptance,[46] and Moscatelli et al. documented how internalized sexualization increases tolerance for harassment.[47] James identified male privilege and entitlement as key drivers of

---

[33] Hammond, M. D., Overall, N. C., & Cross, E. J. (2016). Internalizing sexism within close relationships: Perceptions of intimate partners' benevolent sexism promote women's endorsement of benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *110*(2), 214–238. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000043

[34] Hill, S., & Marshall, T. C. (2018). Beliefs about sexual assault in India and Britain are explained by attitudes toward women and hostile sexism. *Sex Roles*, *79*, 421–430. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0880-6

[35] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016). Labeling sexual victimization experiences: The role of sexism, rape myth acceptance, and tolerance for sexual harassment. *Violence and Victims*, *31*(2), 332–346. https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.VV-D-13-00148

[36] Persson, S., & Dhingra, K. (2022). Moderating factors in culpability ratings and rape proclivity in stranger and acquaintance rape: Validation of rape vignettes in a community sample. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *37*(13–14), NP11358–NP11385. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260521991294

[37] Sanchez-Ruiz, M.-J., El Ahmad, P., Karam, M., & Saliba, M. A. (2021). Rape myth acceptance in Lebanon: The role of sexual assault experience/familiarity, sexism, honor beliefs, and the Dark Triad. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *170*, 110403. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110403

[38] Younas, F., Mahmood, S., & Qayyum, S. (2023). Relationship between sexist attitudes and sexual harassment: Investigating the mediating role of authoritarianism. *Applied Psychology Review*, *2*(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.32350/apr.22.01

[39] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021).

[40] Payne, D. L., Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1999). Rape myth acceptance: Exploration of its structure and measurement using the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale*. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *33*(1), 27–68. https://doi.org/10.1006/jrpe.1998.2238

[41] Hill, S., & Marshall, T. C. (2018).

[42] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).

[43] Moscatelli, S., Golfieri, F., Tomasetto, C., & Bigler, R. S. (2021). Women and #MeToo in Italy: Internalized sexualization is associated with tolerance of sexual harassment and negative views of the #MeToo movement. *Current Psychology*, *40*, 6199–6211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01350-1

[44] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020).

[45] Swim, J. K., & Campbell, B. (2003).

[46] Tompkins, J. E., & Lynch, T. (2018). The concerns surrounding sexist content in digital games. In C. J. Ferguson (Ed.), *Video game influences on aggression, cognition, and attention* (pp. 119–136). Springer.

[47] Moscatelli, S., Golfieri, F., Tomasetto, C., & Bigler, R. S. (2021).

escalation across the Pyramid,[48] while Chetter et al. honed in on surgical settings.[49] These constructs work by feeding the roots of the system, reinforcing and expanding the core sexist belief structure.

Gender Inequality and Tolerance as System-Level Amplifiers: Two constructs—gender inequality and tolerance/justification of harmful beliefs and behaviors—operate at the system level, strengthening the entire Tier 1 network. Kearns et al. showed that structural gender inequality predicts state-level rape rates,[50] while Gutierrez and Leaper described a two-way relationship in which sexist attitudes both reflect and reproduce inequality, with tolerance and justification functioning as the connecting layer.[51] In findings spanning nearly two decades, Foulis and McCabe showed that tolerance for harassment is a direct outcome of rape myth acceptance and sexism in 1997,[52] a finding echoed by LeMaire et al. in 2016.[53] Walker et al. noted that "problematic attitudes and beliefs relating to gender inequality … can underpin violent behaviours that can escalate when left unchallenged."[54] Finally, Kaur and Thalwal similarly showed that patriarchal cultural norms and honor-based expectations (particularly in certain countries) act as system-level forces that shape whether women feel safe reporting harm and whether communities treat violence as legitimate or shameful.[55]

Other Discriminatory Attitudes as Cross-System Amplifiers: Several studies showed that other discriminatory attitudes—including authoritarianism, racialized stereotypes, purity culture, and honor beliefs (in cultural contexts where honor-based norms are present)—interact with and strengthen the Tier 1 network (Gore;[56] Sanchez-Ruiz et al.;[57] Younas et al.[58]). These constructs do not replace gender-specific beliefs; they intensify them, strengthening the belief system that enables escalation.

Across all 30 articles, the evidence is clear: Tier 1 is not a list of 13 separate constructs—they are parts of a single, connected ideological root system. Patriarchal norms form the deepest taproots; traditional gender roles and gender inequality function as the thick lateral roots that extend their reach; hostile and benevolent sexism, misogyny, male privilege, and sexual objectification operate as the feeder roots that absorb and circulate these beliefs; and rape myths, victim blaming, not believing women, and tolerance or justification emerge as the fine root hairs that draw these ideas into everyday interpretation and judgment. Together, these linked beliefs form the deep root system from which sexual violence grows—demonstrating that the harm visible above ground is sustained by the dense network of beliefs and norms beneath it. Tier 1 thus forms the foundational elements that support movement up the Pyramid.

---

[48] James, C. M. (2019). *A new approach to the study of sexual violence: Development and psychometric properties of a preliminary multi-item research instrument assessing rape-resistant attitudes* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Utah].

[49] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025). Sexual misconduct in surgery: "We need to have challenging and awkward conversations." *Bulletin of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, *107*(2), 90–93. https://doi.org/10.1308/rcsbull.2025.42

[50] Kearns, M. C., D'Inverno, A. S., & Reidy, D. E. (2020).

[51] Gutierrez, B. C., & Leaper, C. (2024).

[52] Foulis, D., & McCabe, M. P. (1997). Sexual harassment: Factors affecting attitudes and perceptions. *Sex Roles*, *37*(9–10), 773–798. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02936339

[53] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).

[54] Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023). Preventing sexual harassment through a prosocial bystander campaign: It's #SafeToSay. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, *8*(3), 130–138, p. 130. https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.329

[55] Kaur, N., & Thalwal, H. (2024).

[56] Gore, R. A. (2019). *Association of religious standards and bystander perceptions of shame factors in sexual violence reporting* [Doctoral dissertation, Edgewood College]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

[57] Sanchez-Ruiz, M.-J., El Ahmad, P., Karam, M., & Saliba, M. A. (2021).

[58] Younas, F., Mahmood, S., & Qayyum, S. (2023).

II. Verbal Expressions (Tier 2)

Across the articles reviewed for this analysis, the evidence is clear: the nine elements within Tier 2 do not function as isolated verbal behaviors. Instead, they form a graduated and reinforcing system of expressions—a continuum of outward verbalizations that make Tier 1 beliefs easy to hear, see, and repeat in social settings. These constructs share common roots, appear together in real-world situations, and escalate in predictable ways, ranging from socially tolerated comments to openly harmful verbal attacks. Rather than operating independently, the Tier 2 elements are linked across many studies, cultures, and research methods. Six primary themes emerged from the literature that show how connected the Tier 2 elements are.

Tier 2 as Tier 1 Spoken Out Loud: The most consistent finding across the literature is that every Tier 2 behavior is the verbal expression of one or more Tier 1 beliefs. Angelone et al. showed that hostile sexism fuels insulting statements, and benevolent sexism produces patronizing statements—showing that Tier 1 attitudes translate directly into Tier 2 expressions.[59] Swim and Campbell also described a range of sexist behaviors, from jokes to insults, that map onto Tier 1 constructs such as misogyny and hostile sexism.[60] Payne et al.'s scale further confirmed that rape myth acceptance appears verbally through minimizing and blaming statements,[61] while LeMaire et al. showed that women sometimes take in and repeat these verbal framings in their own self-descriptions.[62] Across studies, the pattern is clear: Tier 2 is the spoken pathway through which Tier 1 beliefs enter social space.

A Core Cluster of Co-Occurring Verbal Behaviors: Several Tier 2 constructs—sexist comments and jokes, rape jokes, victim blaming, and name-calling—form a tightly linked cluster that appear together in many studies. Karami et al.'s text-mining of more than 2,300 workplace harassment narratives showed that sexist jokes, body comments, and derogatory language appeared in the same accounts and often came before escalating behaviors.[63] Chetter et al. mapped a similar pattern in surgical workplaces, where "banter culture" and sexualized jokes led to more explicit verbal and physical violations.[64] Bosson et al. showed experimentally that exposure to misogynistic slurs activated a broader network of misogynistic thinking, confirming that name-calling, rape jokes, and sexist commentary operate as parts of the same verbal system.[65] These constructs are not separate—they are connected expressions of the same underlying ideology.

Objectification-Based Expressions as a Second Cluster: A second group of Tier 2 behaviors—catcalling, making comments and shaming of women's bodies, bragging, and committing microaggressions—shared a common mechanism: the verbal expression of sexual objectification. Karami et al. identified catcalling and making body comments as recurring topics in harassment narratives,[66] while Tompkins and Lynch showed that sexualized media portrayals make these verbal behaviors seem normal in everyday culture.[67] Moscatelli et al. demonstrated that internalized sexualization raises tolerance for harassment, linking objectification beliefs to objectifying speech.[68] Microaggressions, as described by Hajnosz and Ganz[69]

---

[59] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021).
[60] Swim, J. K., & Campbell, B. (2003).
[61] Payne, D. L., Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1999).
[62] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).
[63] Karami, A., Swan, S. C., White, C. N., & Ford, K. (2024). Hidden in plain sight for too long: Using text mining techniques to shine a light on workplace sexism and sexual harassment. *Psychology of Violence*, *14*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000239
[64] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025).
[65] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020).
[66] Karami, A., Swan, S. C., White, C. N., & Ford, K. (2024).
[67] Tompkins, J. E., & Lynch, T. (2018).
[68] Moscatelli, S., Golfieri, F., Tomasetto, C., & Bigler, R. S. (2021).
[69] Hajnosz, I., & Ganz, W. (2017). Gender, attitudes, and behaviors: An analysis of contemporary sexism. *SUURJ: Seattle University Undergraduate Research Journal*, *1*, article 9, 32–39. https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/suurj/vol1/iss1/9

and Swim and Campbell,[70] represent the subtle end of this continuum—expressing the same Tier 1 beliefs in socially deniable ways. Together, these behaviors form a verbal objectification system that reduces women to their bodies and normalizes disrespect.

Verbal Systems That Protect Perpetrators and Silence Survivors: Another set of Tier 2 linguistic constructs—victim blaming, rape jokes, and other discriminatory or problematic language—shares a common, twofold social function: protecting perpetrators and silencing survivors. Hill and Marshall showed that hostile sexism predicts both rape myth acceptance and victim blaming across cultures.[71] Gore demonstrated that purity-based shaming language reduces reporting among survivors,[72] while LeMaire et al. found that exposure to minimizing language makes women less likely to label their own experiences as rape.[73] Kaur and Thalwal similarly showed that shaming language and credibility questioning act as strong verbal deterrents to reporting, reinforcing the same patterns of silencing, minimizing, and dismissing seen across Tier 2.[74] These verbal systems operate as cultural tools of dismissal, shaping how communities interpret harm and whose voices are believed.

An Internal Escalation Structure Within Tier 2: The literature also reveals that Tier 2 is not flat; it contains its own built-in gradient of escalation. Microaggressions and sexist jokes occupy the most socially tolerated end of the continuum (Hajnosz & Ganz[75]), while catcalling, body comments, and bragging are normalized through cultural scripts (Tompkins & Lynch[76]). Name-calling, rape jokes, and discriminatory language represent open hostility (Bosson et al.[77]), and victim blaming functions as the most directly harmful verbal behavior, shaping reporting, justice outcomes, and survivors' self-perceptions (Gore;[78] LeMaire et al.[79]). Murrell and Dietz-Uhler documented a desensitization effect in which repeated exposure to lower-level verbal behaviors increases tolerance for more harmful expressions, making escalation more likely.[80] Tier 2 thus operates as a growing root system, with each layer strengthening the conditions for the next.

Peer Norms as Amplifiers of Tier 2 Behaviors: Finally, multiple studies showed that Tier 2 behaviors become especially powerful when they occur in peer groups. Durán et al. found that male peer support for sexist attitudes raises rape proclivity,[81] while Bosson et al. demonstrated that exposure to misogynistic language primes sexually aggressive responses.[82] Chetter et al. demonstrated how "banter culture" in professional settings normalizes escalating behaviors,[83] and Walker et al. emphasized that harassment escalates when bystanders remain silent.[84] In these contexts, Tier 2 behaviors become shared group norms, not individual acts—strengthening their impact and increasing movement toward Tier 3.

The 30 articles resoundingly demonstrate that Tier 2 is not a list of separate, unconnected verbal behaviors. It is a unified verbal culture of dehumanization—rooted in Tier 1 beliefs, expressed through

---

[70] Swim, J. K., & Campbell, B. (2003).
[71] Hill, S., & Marshall, T. C. (2018).
[72] Gore, R. A. (2019).
[73] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).
[74] Kaur, N., & Thalwal, H. (2024).
[75] Hajnosz, I., & Ganz, W. (2017).
[76] Tompkins, J. E., & Lynch, T. (2018).
[77] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020).
[78] Gore, R. A. (2019).
[79] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).
[80] Murrell, A. J., & Dietz-Uhler, B. L. (1993). Gender identity and adversarial sexual beliefs as predictors of attitudes toward sexual harassment. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *17*(2), 169–175. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1993.tb00442.x
[81] Durán, M., Megías, J. L., & Moya, M. (2018). Male peer support to hostile sexist attitudes influences rape proclivity. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *33*(14), 2180–2196. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515624212
[82] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020); Bosson, J. K., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., Kuchynka, S. L., & Schramm, A. T. (2015).
[83] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025).
[84] Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023).

mutually reinforcing behaviors, and structured along an internal gradient that normalizes escalation. These verbal expressions shape the social environment in which harassment, coercion, and assault become more likely, making Tier 2 a critical bridge between underlying attitudes and higher-tier harms. Together, they function as the early shoots emerging from the deeper ideological roots of sexual violence, showing how harm begins to surface long before it manifests in higher tiers.

III. Harassment & Coercion (Tier 3)

Across the 30 articles reviewed for this analysis, the evidence is strikingly consistent: the nine elements within Tier 3, as with the first two tiers, do not operate as separate behaviors. Instead, they form a unified system of control—a tightly interwoven set of tactics used to assert dominance, create fear, and erode a woman's autonomy. While Tier 1 captures the beliefs that legitimize inequality, and Tier 2 captures the verbal expressions that make those beliefs visible, Tier 3 represents the point at which those beliefs and expressions become behavioral tools of coercion.

The most important finding across the literature is that every Tier 3 behavior—whether psychological, digital, or sexualized—serves the same overarching function: to control, intimidate, or destabilize the target. Chechak and Csiernik identified these behaviors as a coherent class of non-physical aggression, noting that "nonphysical aggression often precipitates physical actions."[85] Walker et al. similarly emphasized that when harmful attitudes go unchallenged, they escalate into behaviors that create fear and restrict autonomy.[86] A clear pattern emerges from the studies: Tier 3 behaviors differ in form, but they are identical in function. These behaviors cluster into three deeply interconnected sub-systems, each reinforcing the others and collectively creating the conditions in which sexual violation becomes more likely.

Sub-System 1 – Psychological Domination: A first cluster—controlling behavior, gaslighting, intimidation, isolation, and verbal or nonverbal threats—forms the psychological domination system. These behaviors share a common mechanism: they destabilize a woman's internal world by eroding her confidence, constraining her choices, and creating an atmosphere of fear that conditions compliance. Across the literature, these tactics are identified as core components of coercive control, functioning as early behavioral tests of dominance that often precede more overt forms of harm.[87] Controlling behavior restricts autonomy; isolation removes social buffers; gaslighting undermines trust in one's own perceptions; and intimidation and threats signal potential consequences for resistance. Together, these behaviors weaken a woman's ability to seek help, challenge mistreatment, or accurately assess risk. Psychological domination is foundational within Tier 3 because it prepares the ground for escalation: by inducing self-doubt, fear, and dependency, it makes surveillance and pursuit more effective and increases vulnerability to sexual boundary violations. In this way, psychological domination operates as the internal conditioning system that enables the broader architecture of Tier 3 to take hold.

Sub-System 2 – Surveillance and Pursuit: A second cluster—stalking, digital harm, and monitoring-type threats—forms the surveillance and pursuit system. These behaviors share a common mechanism: persistent, unwanted monitoring that produces chronic fear. Basile et al., with their Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report, showed that stalking and psychological aggression cluster tightly in victimization data, appearing together in the same relationships.[88] Karami et al. found that digital sexual messages appeared in the same narratives as harassment, exclusion, and retaliation, demonstrating that digital harm extends and amplifies in-person intimidation.[89] Chetter et al. documented the same pattern in

---

[85] Chechak, D., & Csiernik, R. (2014, p. 58).
[86] Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023).
[87] Chechak, D., & Csiernik, R. (2014); Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025); Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023).
[88] Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Kresnow, M., Khatiwada, S., & Leemis, R. W. (2022). T*he national intimate partner and sexual violence survey: 2016/2017 report on sexual violence*. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/124625
[89] Karami, A., Swan, S. C., White, C. N., & Ford, K. (2024).

surgical workplaces, where stalking, digital messages, and intimidation operate simultaneously.[90] Together, these behaviors create a state of ongoing surveillance, making escape feel impossible.

Sub-System 3 – Sexual Boundary Violations: A third cluster—sexual harassment, non-consensual exposure, and behaviors that overlap with Tier 4's uninvited touch—represents the sexualized end of Tier 3. Foulis and McCabe grouped these behaviors together in their Sexual Harassment Experience Questionnaire, showing that sexually suggestive comments, unwanted touching, persistent invitations, and exposure to sexual materials may be elements of the same experiences.[91] Bosson et al. provided experimental evidence that non-consensual exposure is part of the same continuum,[92] while LeMaire et al.[93] and Gutierrez and Leaper[94] showed that sexual harassment shares the same predictors as sexual assault. This cluster sits at the threshold between harassment and assault, marking the behavioral bridge into Tier 4.

The three sub-systems do not operate independently; they are nested and mutually reinforcing. Psychological domination (Sub-System 1) creates the conditions in which surveillance and pursuit (Sub-System 2) become more effective—gaslighting makes victims doubt their perceptions, and isolation reduces access to support. Surveillance and pursuit intensify psychological domination by creating chronic fear and extending control into digital spaces. Together, these two sub-systems enable sexual boundary violations (Sub-System 3), which often emerge after patterns of intimidation, monitoring, and coercion have already been established (Chetter et al.;[95] Davis et al.;[96] Karami et al.[97]). Across studies, Tier 3 emerges as a connected system of control, with each behavior feeding the next linked roots.

A critical mechanism that sustains Tier 3 is bystander inaction. As stated previously, Walker et al. noted that harassment escalates when left unchallenged,[98] while Murrell and Dietz-Uhler showed that repeated exposure to harassment increases tolerance over time.[99] Chechak and Csiernik[100] and Gore[101] documented how institutional silence and community stigma reinforce the entire control system, allowing perpetrators to operate across multiple sub-systems without interruption. Kaur and Thalwal similarly showed that community-level pressure, honor-based expectations, and threats of social ostracism operate as forms of collective coercive control, reinforcing silence and enabling harassment to escalate unchecked.[102] In this way, social inaction becomes the glue that holds Tier 3 together, preserving and strengthening the underlying root system that enables these behaviors to persist and grow.

Tier 3 is the most documented escalation point in the literature. Throughout the studies, non-physical aggression, intimidation, stalking, and sexual harassment are repeatedly identified as precursors to

---

[90] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025).
[91] Foulis, D., & McCabe, M. P. (1997).
[92] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020); Bosson, J. K., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., Kuchynka, S. L., & Schramm, A. T. (2015).
[93] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).
[94] Gutierrez, B. C., & Leaper, C. (2024).
[95] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025).
[96] Davis, J. P., Ports, K. A., Basile, K. C., Espelage, D. L., & David-Ferdon, C. F. (2019). Understanding the buffering effects of protective factors on the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and teen dating violence perpetration. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *48*(12), 2343–2359. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01028-9
[97] Karami, A., Swan, S. C., White, C. N., & Ford, K. (2024).
[98] Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023).
[99] Murrell, A. J., & Dietz-Uhler, B. L. (1993).
[100] Chechak, D., & Csiernik, R. (2014).
[101] Gore, R. A. (2019).
[102] Kaur, N., & Thalwal, H. (2024).

physical and sexual assault (Chechak & Csiernik;[103] Davis et al.;[104] Foulis & McCabe;[105] Karami et al.;[106] Walker et al.[107]). This tier represents the behavioral corridor through which attitudes and verbal expressions become direct violations of bodily autonomy—where the deeper roots of inequality push upward and begin to break the surface.

Across all 30 articles, the evidence demonstrates that, again, Tier 3 is not a list of separate behaviors. It is a connected system of control—organized into interlocking sub-systems, unified by a shared purpose, and structured along an internal gradient that normalizes escalation. These behaviors create the conditions in which sexual violation becomes more likely, making Tier 3 the critical bridge between verbal expressions and direct physical harm. In the metaphor of this framework, Tier 3 represents the thickening mass of the Pyramid's root system—the point where the deeper ideological roots begin to take visible behavioral form, strengthening the pathways toward higher-tier harms.

IV. Sexual Assault (Tier 4)

Across the 30 articles reviewed for this analysis, the evidence is unequivocal: the six elements within Tier 4 do not represent separate offenses. Instead, they are six tactical expressions of a single underlying violation—the overriding of another person's bodily autonomy. While Tier 1 captures the belief system that legitimizes inequality, Tier 2 captures the verbal expressions that normalize harm, and Tier 3 captures the behavioral tools of control, Tier 4 marks the point at which those systems culminate in direct physical or incapacitating violations. These constructs share a common legal definition, appear together in victimization profiles, and are predicted by clusters of attitudinal and structural factors. Together, they form a unified system of bodily violation.

The most consistent finding across the literature is definitional: every Tier 4 behavior constitutes nonconsensual sexual contact or incapacitation. Angelone et al. showed that sexism and rape-supportive beliefs predict a range of sexually aggressive behaviors, aligning with public-health definitions that conceptualize sexual assault as any nonconsensual sexual contact or penetration, including acts accomplished through force, intimidation, coercion, or incapacitation.[108] Basile et al.'s CDC state-by-state report similarly operationalizes rape, sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact, and drug/alcohol-facilitated assault as interlocking categories within the same surveillance instrument.[109] Across the studies, the pattern is clear: these behaviors differ in tactic, not in kind. Three primary clusters constitute this tier.

Cluster 1 – The Coercion–Rape–Exploitation Triangle: Three constructs—sexual coercion, rape, and exploitation—form the most tightly documented relational cluster in the literature. LeMaire et al. treated coercion, incapacitated rape, authority-based exploitation, and force-based rape as a single measurement category, finding that over half of women who experienced these violations did not label them as rape due to rape myth acceptance.[110] The CDC defined these constructs with parallel language and identified the same perpetrator profiles across all three.[111] Persson and Dhingra showed that hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance predict willingness to excuse or commit rape, coercion, and exploitation at equivalent levels.[112] These findings demonstrate that these behaviors share the same perpetration psychology and the same cultural myth system that obscures them.

---

[103] Chechak, D., & Csiernik, R. (2014).
[104] Davis, J. P., Ports, K. A., Basile, K. C., Espelage, D. L., & David-Ferdon, C. F. (2019).
[105] Foulis, D., & McCabe, M. P. (1997).
[106] Karami, A., Swan, S. C., White, C. N., & Ford, K. (2024).
[107] Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023).
[108] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021).
[109] Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Kresnow, M., Khatiwada, S., & Leemis, R. W. (2022).
[110] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).
[111] Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Kresnow, M., Khatiwada, S., & Leemis, R. W. (2022).
[112] Persson, S., & Dhingra, K. (2022).

Cluster 2 – Incapacitation Tactics: A second cluster—drugging, physical abuse, and emotional abuse—functions as a set of incapacitation tools that reduce a victim's ability to resist, consent, or escape. Basile et al. included drugging within the rape definition, treating intoxication and force as co-occurring mechanisms rather than separate pathways.[113] Emotional and physical abuse operate as conditioning environments that make coercion, exploitation, and rape more likely and less recognizable (Gavin et al.;[114] Hammond et al.[115]). Davis et al. showed that emotional abuse normalizes coercion in teen dating violence, which then escalates to physical force or incapacitation.[116] These behaviors are not precursors—they are violation mechanisms that enable the others.

Cluster 3 – The Contact Continuum: A third cluster—uninvited touch, sexual coercion, and rape—forms a physical escalation continuum. Karami et al. identified unwanted touching as the highest-weighted topic in workplace harassment narratives, appearing alongside harassment, groping, and assault.[117] Foulis and McCabe grouped touching, persistent invitations, and assault as sequential escalation points within the same behavioral scale.[118] Bosson et al. showed experimentally that men with a history of sexual assault are more likely to engage in uninvited sexual contact, confirming that these behaviors cluster in the same individuals.[119] Chetter et al. documented this continuum in surgical workplaces, where uninvited touch progresses to groping and then to assault.[120] Across studies, uninvited touch is not a minor incident—it is the first physical breach in a continuum of violation.

One of the most significant findings across the literature is that the six Tier 4 constructs are unified not only by perpetrator logic but by victim labeling failure. LeMaire et al. showed that more than half of women who experienced rape did not label it as rape, and that rape myth acceptance predicted this mislabeling.[121] Payne et al.'s IRMAS scale demonstrated that each Tier 4 construct has a corresponding myth designed to deny or minimize it—myths about intoxication, coercion, exploitation, and uninvited touch.[122] Together, these myths form a single ideological defense system that coalesces all six behaviors and protects perpetrators.

Like Tiers 2 and 3, Tier 4 contains its own built-in progression, defined by degree of force, incapacitation, and perpetrator calculation. Uninvited touch represents the entry point; emotional abuse creates the conditioning environment; coercion applies non-physical pressure; drugging eliminates capacity; exploitation leverages vulnerability; and rape represents the most severe violation. These behaviors may occur in different orders or simultaneously, but the gradient matters because it shows that all six are violations in their own right, not merely steps toward rape.

The strongest evidence of interrelationship is that all six Tier 4 constructs share identical upstream predictors. Hostile sexism, rape myth acceptance, authoritarianism, the Dark Triad,[123] male honor beliefs, benevolent sexism, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) exposure,[124] and structural gender inequality

---

[113] Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Kresnow, M., Khatiwada, S., & Leemis, R. W. (2022).
[114] Gavin, P., Kite, C., Porter, C., McCartan, K., & Cawley, P. (2023). Restorative justice in cases of sexual violence: Current and future directions in the UK. *Contemporary Justice Review*, *26*(4), 393–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2024.2330375
[115] Hammond, M. D., Overall, N. C., & Cross, E. J. (2016).
[116] Davis, J. P., Ports, K. A., Basile, K. C., Espelage, D. L., & David-Ferdon, C. F. (2019).
[117] Karami, A., Swan, S. C., White, C. N., & Ford, K. (2024).
[118] Foulis, D., & McCabe, M. P. (1997).
[119] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020); Bosson, J. K., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., Kuchynka, S. L., & Schramm, A. T. (2015).
[120] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025).
[121] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).
[122] Payne, D. L., Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1999).
[123] This includes these three traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. This is discussed in Sanchez-Ruiz, M.-J., El Ahmad, P., Karam, M., & Saliba, M. A. (2021).
[124] Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur before age 18 and disrupt a child's sense of safety, stability, or bonding. They include experiences such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse;

predict these behaviors through the same pathways (e.g., Gutierrez & Leaper;[125] Kearns et al.;[126] Persson & Dhingra;[127] Sanchez-Ruiz et al.;[128] Younas et al.[129]). When six behaviors consistently co-vary with the same attitudinal variables, they are expressions of the same underlying phenomenon.

Tier 4 is also the most direct bridge to Tier 5. Sexual assault predicts suicidality (Angelone et al.[130]), PTSD and fear for life (Basile et al.[131]), institutional revictimization (Gavin et al.[132]), and lethal honor violence (Sanchez-Ruiz et al.[133]). Across contexts, Tier 4 violations are the immediate precursors to lethal outcomes, making this tier a critical point for intervention.

The bottom line is this: as with the other tiers, across all 30 articles, the evidence demonstrates that Tier 4 is not a list of separate offenses. It is a unified system of bodily violation—six tactics that differ in mechanism but share one perpetration psychology, one myth-defense system, and one survivor experience of nonconsent being overridden. These behaviors co-occur, escalate, and reinforce one another, forming the final behavioral bridge to lethal violence. Within the metaphor of this framework, Tier 4 represents the point where the deep roots of sexual violence break fully above the surface—where the subterranean system of beliefs, expressions, and control becomes unmistakably visible as direct violations of bodily autonomy.

V. Lethal (Tier 5)

Across the 30 articles reviewed for this analysis, the evidence is clear: the elements within Tier 5—gender-based homicide, intimate partner homicide, honor-based killings, and abuse-related suicide—do not function as isolated tragedies. Instead, they represent the most extreme outcomes of the same interconnected system of beliefs, expressions, and behaviors documented in Tiers 1–4. The literature consistently shows that lethal violence is almost never spontaneous; it emerges from identifiable patterns of coercion, domination, and violation that have been escalating over time.

The strongest finding across the literature base is that all Tier 5 outcomes share a common perpetrator logic: the use of lethal force to reassert control, punish perceived disobedience, or eliminate a partner's autonomy entirely. Angelone et al.[134] and Basile et al.[135] documented that sexual assault and coercive control significantly increase suicidality and fear for life, while Gavin et al. showed that institutional revictimization compounds this harm.[136] Sanchez-Ruiz et al. identified honor killings as a culturally specific form of patriarchal enforcement, triggered by perceived violations of gender norms.[137] Across contexts, Tier 5 behaviors are united by a single function: the ultimate enforcement of patriarchal power.

The attitudinal and structural predictors that drive Tiers 1–4 also predict Tier 5 outcomes. Hostile sexism, male honor beliefs, rape myth acceptance, authoritarianism, and structural gender inequality all appear in

---

neglect; witnessing domestic violence; living with a caregiver who struggles with substance use or mental illness; parental separation or incarceration; and other forms of household instability. Research shows that the more ACEs a person experiences, the higher their risk for long-term health, mental health, and relational challenges in adulthood.

[125] Gutierrez, B. C., & Leaper, C. (2024).
[126] Kearns, M. C., D'Inverno, A. S., & Reidy, D. E. (2020).
[127] Persson, S., & Dhingra, K. (2022).
[128] Sanchez-Ruiz, M.-J., El Ahmad, P., Karam, M., & Saliba, M. A. (2021).
[129] Younas, F., Mahmood, S., & Qayyum, S. (2023).
[130] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021).
[131] Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Kresnow, M., Khatiwada, S., & Leemis, R. W. (2022).
[132] Gavin, P., Kite, C., Porter, C., McCartan, K., & Cawley, P. (2023).
[133] Sanchez-Ruiz, M.-J., El Ahmad, P., Karam, M., & Saliba, M. A. (2021).
[134] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021).
[135] Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Kresnow, M., Khatiwada, S., & Leemis, R. W. (2022).
[136] Gavin, P., Kite, C., Porter, C., McCartan, K., & Cawley, P. (2023).
[137] Sanchez-Ruiz, M.-J., El Ahmad, P., Karam, M., & Saliba, M. A. (2021).

the literature as risk factors for lethal violence (e.g., Hill & Marshall;[138] Kearns et al.;[139] Sanchez-Ruiz et al.[140]). These predictors do not merely correlate with homicide—they shape the cultural and relational conditions that make lethal violence possible. In this way, Tier 5 is not a separate pattern but the far end of the same continuum.

Multiple studies document that Tier 5 outcomes are preceded by the same patterns of coercion, intimidation, stalking, and sexual violation found in Tiers 3 and 4. Davis et al. showed that threatening behavior and sexual violence in adolescence predict later severe violence.[141] Chetter et al. described real-world cases in which harassment, coercion, and assault escalated to homicide.[142] Kombo documented conflict-related sexual violence that co-occurs with lethal attacks.[143] Across studies, the pathway is consistent: Tier 5 is the culmination of escalating control.

The literature also shows that Tier 5 outcomes are reinforced by the same cultural forces that sustain earlier tiers. Victim-blaming, disbelief, purity-based shaming, and institutional silence all reduce reporting, increase perpetrator impunity, and heighten risk for lethal outcomes (Gore;[144] LeMaire et al.[145]). These mechanisms do not merely accompany Tier 5—they enable it.

Across all 30 articles, the evidence demonstrates that Tier 5 is not a set of disconnected tragedies. It is the final outcome of the same interconnected system of patriarchal beliefs, verbal dehumanization, coercive control, and bodily violation documented in Tiers 1–4. These lethal outcomes emerge from predictable escalation pathways and share identical attitudinal and structural predictors. Within the metaphor of this framework, Tier 5 represents the exposed branches of a much deeper root system—visible only after the underlying roots of inequality, control, and violation have been allowed to grow unchecked.

Final Reflections

Taken together, the evidence across all 30 articles reveals a single, unmistakable truth: the elements within each tier of the Pyramid do not stand alone. They form an interconnected ecosystem in which beliefs, expressions, behaviors, violations, and lethal outcomes are linked through shared roots, shared predictors, and shared pathways of escalation. Tier 1 provides the ideological soil; Tier 2 makes those beliefs audible and socially reinforced; Tier 3 transforms them into behavioral tools of control; Tier 4 manifests them as direct violations of bodily autonomy; and Tier 5 exposes the most devastating consequences when these systems go unchallenged.

Across this entire structure, the same patterns repeat: clustering, reinforcement, normalization, and escalation. The same attitudes predict the same behaviors across multiple tiers. The same verbal expressions enable the same forms of coercion. The same control tactics precede the same violations. And the same cultural silences allow harm to deepen and spread. Sexual violence in Utah is not a series of isolated incidents—it is the visible outgrowth of a deeply rooted system that has been allowed to take hold in our communities, institutions, and relationships.

Within the metaphor of this framework, the Pyramid is not simply a stack of behaviors; it is a living root system. What appears above ground in the tangible, visible world—harassment, coercion, assault, and lethal violence—is sustained by what lies beneath: entrenched beliefs, normalized expressions, and tolerated patterns of control. Understanding these internal connections is essential for prevention, because

[138] Hill, S., & Marshall, T. C. (2018).
[139] Kearns, M. C., D'Inverno, A. S., & Reidy, D. E. (2020).
[140] Sanchez-Ruiz, M.-J., El Ahmad, P., Karam, M., & Saliba, M. A. (2021)
[141] Davis, J. P., Ports, K. A., Basile, K. C., Espelage, D. L., & David-Ferdon, C. F. (2019).
[142] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025).
[143] Kombo, B. K. (2024, November 25).
[144] Gore, R. A. (2019).
[145] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).

it reveals where intervention is most powerful: at the roots, before harm grows upward into branches that are far more difficult to prune.

Escalation Through Tiers

Across the 30 articles reviewed, one pattern appears again and again: sexual violence does not move randomly. It follows predictable pathways of escalation in which attitudes shape language, language shapes behavior, and behavior shapes violation. While the previous section focused primarily on how elements cluster within each tier—with some discussion of escalation patterns—this section highlights ten studies that demonstrate how research has documented movement across tiers. These cross-tier pathways show how beliefs become expressions, how expressions become actions, and how actions become harm.

To illustrate this pattern, the following ten manuscript examples summarize some of the clearest forms of escalation documented in the research.

1. Angelone et al.:[146]
   - Tier 1→Tier 2 (sexist beliefs produce victim-blaming statements)
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (rape myths justify assault)
   - Tier 2→Tier 4 (victim-blaming reduces reporting)
   - Tier 1→Tier 4→Tier 5 (attitudes increase the likelihood of violations and severe outcomes)
2. Bosson et al.:[147]
   - Tier 1→Tier 2 (sexism activates misogynistic language)
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (hostile sexism predicts sexual aggression)
   - Tier 2→Tier 4 (misogynistic language primes sexually aggressive behavior)
   - Tier 1→Tier 2→Tier 4 (sexist beliefs shape language and aggression together)
3. Durán et al.:[148]
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (hostile sexism increases rape proclivity; peer norms amplify risk)
   - Tier 1→Tier 2→Tier 4 (objectification leads to sexually aggressive behavior)
4. Gavin et al.:[149]
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (cultural norms enable sexual violence)
   - Tier 1→Tier 3 (power imbalances drive revictimization)
   - Tier 2→Tier 3 (victim-blaming becomes intimidation)
   - Tier 4→Tier 3 (reverse pathway: assault leads to institutional revictimization)
5. Gutierrez & Leaper:[150]
   - Tier 1→Tier 2 (sexism produces victim-blaming language)
   - Tier 1→Tier 3 (sexism predicts harassment)
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (sexism predicts sexual assault)
6. Hill & Marshall:[151]
   - Tier 1→Tier 2 (hostile sexism produces victim-blaming)
   - Tier 1→Tier 3 (rape myths normalize harassment)
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (sexism justifies assault)
   - Tier 1→Tier 5 (patriarchal norms justify lethal honor violence)
7. Kearns et al.:[152]
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (gender inequality predicts higher rape prevalence)
   - Tier 1→Tier 3 (patriarchal norms normalize harassment)

---

[146] Angelone, D. J., Cantor, N., Marcantonio, T., & Joppa, M. (2021).
[147] Bosson, J. K., Kuchynka, S. L., Parrott, D. J., Swan, S. C., & Schramm, A. T. (2020).
[148] Durán, M., Megías, J. L., & Moya, M. (2018).
[149] Gavin, P., Kite, C., Porter, C., McCartan, K., & Cawley, P. (2023).
[150] Gutierrez, B. C., & Leaper, C. (2024).
[151] Hill, S., & Marshall, T. C. (2018).
[152] Kearns, M. C., D'Inverno, A. S., & Reidy, D. E. (2020).

- Tier 1→Tier 2 (traditional norms produce rape-supportive attitudes)

8. LeMaire et al.:[153]
   - Tier 1→Tier 4 (beliefs distort recognition of sexual assault)
   - Tier 1→Tier 3→Tier 4 (harassment tolerance normalizes coercion, which leads to assault)
   - Tier 2→Tier 4 (victim-blaming language contributes to denial of rape)
9. Persson & Dhingra:[154]
   - Tier 1→Tier 2→Tier 3→Tier 4 (hostile sexism + rape myths → victim blame → rape proclivity → assault excusing → assault)
10. Tompkins & Lynch:[155]
    - Tier 1→Tier 2→Tier 3→Tier 4 (sexualized portrayals → sexist beliefs → harassment tolerance → rape myth acceptance → sexual aggression risk)

Across these studies, one message is unmistakable: escalation is not an accident. It is a pattern so consistent—and so often overlooked in Utah—that it must be stated plainly. It is a documented pattern that appears in workplaces, schools, homes, digital spaces, and public environments. Again, as Chechak and Csiernik put it, "nonphysical aggression often precipitates physical actions."[156] This finding is echoed across multiple fields—from workplace violence research to adolescent dating violence to sexual misconduct in professional settings. The same pattern repeats: what begins as attitudes becomes language, what begins as language becomes behavior, and what begins as behavior becomes violation.

The literature also shows that escalation is not only behavioral—it is cultural and institutional. Building on Swim and Campbell's findings that misogynistic stereotypes express sexist hostility and that patriarchal hierarchies nourish these attitudes,[157] Tier 1 beliefs clearly do not remain contained at the base of the Pyramid. They can move upward unless they are "weeded out" through identification and systemic social change. For example, Chetter et al. vividly demonstrated the hardening of attitudes in surgical culture, where "banter culture emboldened him," allowing verbal harms to escalate into harassment, coercion, and assault.[158] These examples show that escalation is not simply an individual pattern—it is a system-supported progression that unfolds when norms go unchallenged.

Finally, the research makes clear that escalation is preventable when early-tier behaviors are addressed. As stated previously, Walker et al. summarized this most directly: "problematic attitudes and beliefs relating to gender inequality … can underpin violent behaviours that can escalate when left unchallenged."[159] This means that intervention at Tier 1 and Tier 2 is not symbolic—it is strategic. It interrupts the pathways that lead to harassment, coercion, assault, and even lethal outcomes. When viewed together, the cross-tier pathways documented in these ten studies show that sexual violence is not a series of isolated incidents but a predictable escalation pattern rooted in beliefs, reinforced through language, and expressed through increasingly harmful behaviors.

Next Steps

This white paper is conceptual by design. Its purpose is to help Utahns understand the roots of sexual violence so that prevention efforts—across families, congregations, organizations, and communities—can be grounded in a shared understanding of how harm develops and escalates. While this report does not offer a full set of prevention strategies, several next steps naturally emerge from the literature and from the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid itself:

---

[153] LeMaire, K. L., Oswald, D. L., & Russell, B. L. (2016).
[154] Persson, S., & Dhingra, K. (2022).
[155] Tompkins, J. E., & Lynch, T. (2018).
[156] Chechak, D., & Csiernik, R. (2014, p. 58).
[157] Swim, J. K., & Campbell, B. (2003).
[158] Chetter, I., Garnham, A., & Nortley, M. (2025).
[159] Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023).

- **Increase awareness and education.** Communities cannot prevent what they do not understand. Sharing this framework in faith settings, schools, nonprofits, and civic groups can help Utahns recognize early warning signs and understand the continuum of harm.
- **Strengthen protective environments.** Research shows that communities with clear expectations, transparent processes, and equitable norms reduce opportunities for harm. Faith communities, workplaces, schools, and youth programs need fortification.
- **Support survivors with compassion and credibility.** Believing women and responding with empathy disrupts the cultural patterns that allow violence to persist.
- **Examine cultural norms with honesty.** Many of the upstream drivers of violence—gender inequality, patriarchal norms, silence, and stigma—are deeply embedded in Utah's culture. Addressing them requires courage, humility, and collective commitment.

For those ready to take action, the UWLP offers a Resource Library with research-based materials on child sexual abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, and sexual harassment, as well as a Take Action webpage with concrete steps individuals, families, organizations, and communities can take to reduce harm and strengthen safety across the state. Appendix B provides additional sexual assault resources specific to Utah to support those seeking help or looking to become involved.

Conclusion

For years, I have heard the claim that Utah is somehow exempt from violence against women and children—that our strong religious presence, family-centered culture, and "good people" protect us from the patterns seen elsewhere. Some have even attempted to reinforce this belief with selective or incomplete data. But the evidence is unequivocal: Utah is not immune. Our rates of sexual violence are real, they are well-documented, and they are reflected in the thousands of stories women have shared with me over two decades. *Protecting our reputation cannot come at the expense of protecting our people*. Acknowledging the problem is not an indictment of Utah; it is an act of courage and care for the women, children, and families who call this state home.

Sexual violence does not emerge from nowhere. It grows from attitudes, norms, and systems that shape how we understand gender, power, and worth. Utah's high rates of sexual violence are not inevitable, nor are they a reflection of individual moral failure. They are the predictable outcome of cultural patterns that can be changed when communities are willing to see them clearly and address them honestly. Although many elements of our culture are shaped by a strong religious presence—and those influences are deeply important to our state—the attitudes and beliefs embedded in Tier 1 are not fixed. If Utah chooses to make reducing violence a true priority, we can shift these norms in strategic, respected, and culturally grounded ways far sooner than most people imagine.

The Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid offers a shared framework for understanding how harm develops and how it can be interrupted. It does not blame families, faith communities, or culture; rather, it illuminates the pathways through which violence becomes possible so that Utahns can work together to prevent it. It is also important to acknowledge that sexual violence affects people across many identities and life experiences. While this report centers women and girls due to the scope of the research and Utah's gender-based disparities, the broader patterns described here apply to many others whose experiences also deserve recognition and support.

If we want a state where women and girls can thrive—where families are safe, communities are strong, and our values align with our outcomes—we must be willing to confront the roots of harm and commit to meaningful change. Understanding is the first step. Action is the next. And together, Utah can build a future where safety, dignity, and belonging are the norm, not the exception.

The Utah Women & Leadership Project's core mission is to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women, with a foundational focus on producing relevant, trustworthy, and applicable research for decision makers and residents (see www.utwomen.org for more information). In addition, UWLP's flagship statewide initiative, A Bolder Way Forward, is designed to drive significant change by 2030 and focuses on ensuring that more girls, women, and families thrive.

Author: Dr. Susan R. Madsen is considered one of the top global scholars and thought leaders on the topic of women's leadership; she has authored or edited nine books and has published hundreds of articles, chapters, and reports. Her research has been cited in the *U.S. News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *Parenting Magazine*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *The Washington Post*. She is also a regular contributor to *Forbes* and other local and state newspapers. Professor Madsen is the Extension Professor of Leadership at Utah State University and serves on many nonprofit and community boards. She is also the Founding Director of the Utah Women & Leadership Project and the visionary behind Utah's A Bolder Way Forward. Her passion is to strengthen the impact of girls and women in Utah and worldwide.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to Merriann & Steven Monson, Elizabeth Brown, & Greg Madsen for their ongoing support for this work. Thank you to Dr. Julie Valentine, Greg Madsen, and Jessica Woodbury for their reviews, and to Deb Thornton for her professional review and editing.

APPENDIX A
EXAMPLES OF EXISTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE MODELS

1. *Higher Education & Campus-Based Prevention Models*: These models come from universities, colleges, and educational organizations focused on student safety, prevention training, and campus culture change. Higher education institutions are national leaders in sexual-violence prevention and have developed some of the most widely used training frameworks.
    a. 11th Principle: Consent! – *Rape Culture Pyramid*[160]
    b. BCcampus – *Sexual Violence: Key Concepts and Facilitation Strategies*[161]
    c. Olson and Everbach (2018) – *How to Teach Reporting on Sexual Abuse*[162]
    d. PsychologyFor – *The Pyramid of Sexist Violence*[163]
    e. Toronto Metropolitan University – *Gender-Based Violence Pyramid*[164]
    f. University of Calgary – *Ask first: The Facts*[165]
    g. University of Winnipeg – *Understand Sexual Violence*[166]
    h. Walker et al. (2023) – *#SafeToSay Bystander Campaign*[167]

2. *Nonprofit, Advocacy, and Anti-Violence Organizations*: These models were crafted by sexual-assault centers, gender-equity nonprofits, and advocacy groups working directly with survivors and communities. Their frameworks are grounded in lived experience and frontline realities.
    i. Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services – *Why Sexual Violence Occurs*[168]
    j. Collective Shout – *Rape Culture Pyramid*[169]
    k. Durham Rape Crisis Centre – *Spectrum of Sexual Violence*[170]
    l. Guy (2006) – *Re-visioning the Sexual Violence Continuum* (PCAR)[171]
    m. National Indigenous Women's Resource Center – *Intimate Partner Violence Triangle*[172]
    n. Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect – *Racial & Sexual Violence Pyramid*[173]

3. *Public Health, Global Health & Human Rights Organizations*: These frameworks come from organizations focused on population-level violence prevention, structural drivers, and global

---

[160] 11th Principle: Consent!. (n.d.). *Rape culture pyramid*. https://www.11thprincipleconsent.org/consent-propaganda/rape-culture-pyramid/
[161] BCcampus. (n.d.). *Sexual violence: Key concepts and facilitation strategies*. https://opentextbc.ca/svmsurvivors/chapter/sexual-violence-key-concepts-and-facilitation-strategies/
[162] Olson, C. C., & Everbach, T. (2018, February 12). *How to teach reporting on sexual abuse*. MediaShift. https://mediashift.org/2018/02/4-step-guide-teach-reporting-sexual-abuse/
[163] PsychologyFor. (2025). *The pyramid of sexist violence*. https://psychologyfor.com/the-pyramid-of-sexist-violence/
[164] Toronto Metropolitan University. (n.d.). *Gender-based violence pyramid*. https://www.torontomu.ca/sexual-violence/
[165] University of Calgary. (n.d.). *Ask first: The facts*. https://ucalgary.ca/student-services/ask-first/facts
[166] University of Winnipeg. (n.d.). *Understand sexual violence*. https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/respect/sexual-violence/understand-sexual-violence.html
[167] Walker, A., Barton, E. R., Parry, B., & Snowdon, L. C. (2023).
[168] Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services. (n.d.).
[169] Collective Shout. (2025, June 2). *Unpacking the rape culture pyramid: How everyday sexism fuels male violence*. https://www.collectiveshout.org/the_rape_culture_pyramid
[170] Durham Rape Crisis Centre. (n.d.). *General information about sexual assault*. https://drcc.ca/sexual-assault/general-information/
[171] Guy, L. (2006). *Re-visioning the sexual violence continuum*. Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect. https://pcar.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdfs/re-visioning-the-sexual-violence-continuum.pdf
[172] National Indigenous Women's Resource Center. (n.d.). *Intimate partner violence triangle*. https://www.niwrc.org/resources/resource-tool/intimate-partner-violence-triangle
[173] Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect. (n.d.). *Racial & sexual violence pyramid*. https://pcar.org/resource/racial-sexual-violence-pyramid

gender-based violence. They emphasize systems of oppression, structural inequality, and public health approaches.

o. Anti-Defamation League – *Pyramid of Hate*[174]
p. International Planned Parenthood Federation/YSAFE – *SGBV 101*[175]
q. Light for the World – *How to Fight Intersectional Discrimination*[176]

4. *Community-Based, School-Based, and Youth-Focused Models*: These frameworks come from organizations focused on population-level violence prevention, structural drivers, and global gender-based violence. They emphasize systems of oppression, structural inequality, and public-health approaches.
    r. Comberton Village College – *Sexual Violence Pyramid*[177]
    s. Pyramid of Sexual Violence (Facebook post)[178]
    t. Tandon (2024) – *Abuse & Assault Escalation Pyramid*[179]

[174] Anti-Defamation League. (2021). *Pyramid of hate.* https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/pyramid-of-hate-web-english_1.pdf
[175] International Planned Parenthood Federation. (2026). *Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) 101*. https://ysafe/ippf/toolkit/part-01/chapter-3/sexual-and-gender-based-violence-sgbv-101/
[176] Light for the World. (2024, June 3). *How to fight intersectional discrimination: Six practical tips*. https://www.light-for-the-world.org/news/how-to-fight-intersectional-discrimination-six-practical-tips/
[177] Comberton Village College. (n.d.). *Sexual violence pyramid: Categories and components*. https://www.combertonvc.org/parent-and-student-information/child-on-child.php
[178] RaiseyourVoice. (2025, January 28). *Pyramid of sexual violence* [image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/100066381771911/posts/936754445213939/
[179] Tandon, B. (2024, April 18). *Abuse & assault escalation pyramid* [Image]. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bhavya-tandon-5a9389135_for-the-past-two-years-ive-consistently-ugcPost-7230119498878500864-Nx_-/

APPENDIX B
SEXUAL ASSAULT RESOURCES IN UTAH

Immediate Help: 24/7 Crisis Help Line: 801-736-4356 | 24/7 Ayuda en Español: 801-924-0860 | If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

Community Organizations

- Canyon Creek Services (Iron, Beaver, and Garfield counties)
- Citizens Against Physical and Sexual Abuse (CAPSA) (Cache and Rich counties)
- Colleen's Sanctuary (Carbon and Emery counties)
- DOVE Center (Washinton and Kane counties)
- Gender-Based Violence Consortium (University of Utah)
- Gentle Ironhawk Shelter (San Juan County)
- New Hope Crisis Center (Box Elder County)
- New Horizons Crisis Center (Sevier, Millard, Piute, Wayne, and Sanpete counties)
- Pathways Sanctuary & Advocacy Center (Tooele County)
- Peace House (Summit and Wasatch counties)
- Rape Recovery Center (Salt Lake County)
- Safe Harbor (Davis County)
- Seekhaven (Grand County)
- South Valley Services (Salt Lake County)
- Southwest Forensic Nursing & Healthcare
- The Refuge Utah (Utah, Juab, and Wasatch counties)
- United Way 2-1-1 (Statewide)
- Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Statewide)
- Utah Office for Victims of Crime (Statewide)
- Utah Women & Leadership Project
- Your Community Connection (YCC) (Weber and Morgan counties)

Community Resources

- Timpanogos Legal Center (Legal Resources for Victims)
- Relationship Violence Toolkit for Educators (Gender-Based Violence Consortium and Fight Against Domestic Violence, 2021)
- Futures Without Violence (Resource Library)
- Work Without Fear: How Improving Access to Employment Laws Prevents and Addresses Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking in the Workplace (Futures Without Violence)

UWLP Research & Resources

- Conversation Guide: Sexual Assault in Utah
- Data Visualizations: Sexual Assault Dashboard Goal Metrics and Utahns' Perceptions Dashboard
- Handout: Sexual Assault: What Utahns Need to Know
- Infographic: Human Trafficking Among Utah Girls and Women [Spanish]
- Infographic: Sexual Assault Among Utah Women: A 2022 Update [Spanish]
- Podcast: A Bolder Way Forward Conversations: Sexual Assault
- Podcast: Human Trafficking Among Utah Girls and Women
- Podcast: New Research: Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
- Podcast: Sexual Assault Among Utah Women: A 2022 Update
- Podcast: Stopping Violence Against Utah Girls & Women
- Podcast: Understanding Sexual Assault in Utah
- Podcast: Women's Safety & Security: Child Sexual Abuse & Sexual Assault

- Report: Human Trafficking Among Utah Girls and Women – 2022
- Report: Sexual Assault Among Utah Women: A 2022 Update
- Report: Sexual Assault Research Summary – 2024
- Report: Women's Safety & Security 2025: Utahns' Awareness, Understanding, and Attitudes – 2026
- Report: Women's Safety & Security: Utahn's Awareness, Understanding, and Attitudes – 2025
- Video: A Bolder Way Forward – Sexual Assault Spoke
- Video: Sexual Assault in Utah: Shining a Light on a Serious Issue
- Video: Stopping Violence Against Utah Girls & Women

Community Research

- Costs of Sexual Violence in Utah (Utah Department of Health, 2016*)*
- Crime in Utah 2020 (Utah Department of Public Safety, 2020)
- Crime in Utah Dashboards (Utah Department of Public Safety)
- National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS, 2024)
- Public Health Indicator Based Information System (IBIS): Health Indicator Report of Sexual Violence (Utah Department of Health & Human Services, 2024)
- Rape in Utah 2007: A Survey of Utah Women (Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, 2007)
- The Well-Being of Women in Utah in 2019 (YWCA, 2019)
- Utah State Wide Needs Assessment: Domestic Violence, Sexual Violence & Human Trafficking – 2022 White Paper (Gender-Based Violence Consortium, University of Utah, May 2022)

Also see the full UWLP Resource Library, as well as resource kits specifically related to Child Sexual Abuse, Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Sexism & Utah Context, and Sexual Harassment & Gender-Based Discrimination.