

USU UWLP Releases Research on the Root Causes of Sexual Violence in Utah

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The [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) (UWLP) at Utah State University has released a white paper, [The Roots of Sexual Violence in Utah: A Framework for Understanding Harm](#), offering the most comprehensive synthesis to date of why sexual violence remains pervasive in the state and what cultural, structural, and attitudinal factors allow it to persist.

Despite Utah's strong family-oriented identity and deeply held values of community, service, and moral responsibility, the state continues to report higher than national average rates of rape, child sexual abuse, and other forms of gender-based harm. Drawing on decades of national and international research, Utah-specific data, and existing violence prevention models, the white paper provides a clear, evidence-based framework for understanding how sexual violence develops, escalates, and becomes normalized.

"Sexual violence is not random, and it is not inevitable," said Susan R. Madsen, founding director of UWLP and sole author of the report. "It grows from the roots. Attitudes, beliefs, norms, and systems all shape how people understand gender, power, and worth. If we want to reduce harm in Utah, we must understand the conditions that allow it to take hold."

A New Framework: The Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid

At the center of the report is the Utah Sexual Violence Pyramid, a five-tier model illustrating how cultural norms and beliefs can escalate into harassment, coercion, assault, and, in the most extreme cases, lethal violence. The model synthesizes the strongest and most consistent findings across psychology, sociology, public health, criminology, and gender studies.

The foundational tier, *Attitudes & Beliefs*, includes 13 interconnected elements such as patriarchal norms, benevolent and hostile sexism, gender-based stereotypes, rape myths, sexual objectification, and male privilege. These beliefs, the report notes, "form the cultural base that shapes perceptions of gender, power, and entitlement," creating the conditions in which higher-tier behaviors become possible.

"Many Utahns may not realize how strongly these attitudes correlate across cultures and studies," Madsen said. "But the evidence is clear: when harmful beliefs are normalized or minimized, the likelihood of escalation increases."

The Pyramid makes one point unmistakable: sexual violence escalates. The base tier, *Attitudes & Beliefs*, shapes how people understand gender, power, and entitlement. Tier two captures the *Verbal Expressions* that externalize those beliefs through jokes, comments, and boundary testing. Tier three includes *Harassment & Coercion*, where control and intimidation become more overt. Tier four is *Sexual Assault*, the direct violation of bodily autonomy. *Lethal Violence*, the final tier, represents the most extreme outcomes, including abuse-related homicide and suicide. Together, the tiers show that harm does not appear suddenly. Instead, it grows upward from cultural roots that are often ignored or minimized.

Utah's Unique Context

The report highlights several Utah-specific factors that shape survivors' experiences, including strong religious cohesion, cultural expectations around purity and forgiveness, and norms that prioritize family preservation. While these values offer many benefits, they can also create environments where survivors may feel silenced, perpetrators are often protected, and early warning signs are overlooked.

"Faith communities play a vital role in the lives of many Utahns," Madsen said. "But research shows that patriarchal norms and gender inequity—common in many religious settings—can unintentionally create vulnerabilities. Recognizing these patterns is not an attack on faith; it is an effort to protect individuals and strengthen families."

A Call to Action for Utah

The white paper emphasizes that preventing sexual violence requires more than addressing individual behavior. It calls for statewide investment in prevention, education, research, and cultural change.

“This report is a roadmap,” Madsen said. “If we truly care about our daughters, granddaughters, sisters, neighbors, and friends, we must be willing to confront the roots of harm and work together to create safer communities.”

The [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) strengthens the impact of Utah girls and women through research, resources, and statewide engagement. Its premier initiative—[A Bolder Way Forward](#)—creates opportunities for Utahns to learn, collaborate, and drive meaningful change across 18 areas of focus. For more information, visit the UWLP website at utwomen.org. The UWLP is affiliated with [USU Extension](#).

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