

Objectification of Women Happens in Utah, USU Study Shows

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Although sexist comments and remarks are prevalent and normalized in daily settings and conversations worldwide, a recent study by the Utah State University Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) sought to understand Utah women's specific experiences.

An extensive study was conducted in the spring of 2020 and was administered through an online survey to a sample of Utah women ages 18 to 70+ from diverse backgrounds and situations, with 839 Utah women participating. Five research reports are being created from the findings. This report focuses on the women's accounts of objectification, and upcoming reports will include the topics of stereotypes and undervaluing women.

The objectification theme encompassed comments that made women feel more like objects than human beings. Some respondents also reported sexist situations and behaviors such as unwelcome touching, grabbing, or groping.

Seven categories surfaced regarding objectification: 1) focus on physical appearance and bodies, 2) sexual harassment, including remarks or behaviors, 3) sexualizing women as objects, 4) unwanted sexual advances, 5) intersectional discrimination, including sexist comments that also contained references to race, age, weight, religion, or other elements, 6) exclusion from work activities with the implication that women are viewed as sex objects rather than as colleagues, and 7) accusations of women using sex to get ahead.

Susan Madsen, founding director of the UWLP and one of three report authors, said it is essential to provide

education about how language and behavior can demean and disempower women.

"Unfortunately, many of the comments shared were much more explicit and vulgar than what we included in this report," she said. "As difficult as it was for many of these women to share what was said to them, it is critical for us to be aware of what is happening so we can educate and help people do better, whether their comments were blatant, subtle, aggressive, or unintentional."

Category details and comments include:

1) Focus on physical appearance and bodies – One woman reported, "The first time we met, he said, 'What a surprise. I thought you'd look a lot older than you do. You've still got a good 10 years of sex kitten left in you!'" Another said, "He wanted to know how they could let me, someone who is 'homely and looks like a sad old man' work the front desk when there was a real looker in the other office who could be in my place." Another reported, "He looked at me and said, 'You? But you're a cute, little blonde thing. You can't be a mayor!'"

2) Sexual harassment – One woman reported, "A male colleague was interviewing candidates for a vacant position on his team. He told [other subordinates] that he could not consider one of the internal candidates because he would be distracted all day by her breasts." Another said, "I worked in a congressional office, and my boss frequently made sexist and inappropriate comments. I finally called and reported him but was told, 'Unless he touches you, there's really nothing we can do.' Congress wrote themselves out of the sexual harassment laws."

3) Sexualizing women – One woman said, "He talked about sexual assault and said, 'Well you can't parade raw meat in front of a tiger and expect it not to pounce.'" Another reported, "He said, 'Women shouldn't work because that just creates opportunities for extramarital affairs.'"

4) Unwanted sexual advances – One woman reported, "A male colleague told me, 'Those jeans look good. They'd look better draped over my dresser.'" Another said, "I was looking for a place to sit during a conference we were both attending as city council members, though from different cities. He patted his lap and told me I could sit there."

5) Intersectional discrimination – One woman said, "During a deposition, opposing counsel tried to intimidate me repeatedly. At one point, I made an objection to a question (totally appropriate for attorneys to do), and he stopped, looked directly at my client and said, 'Your attorney is too young and dumb to know that she's not allowed to object that way....'"

6) Exclusion from work activities – A woman reported, "When on a student selection panel, one of the faculty said he couldn't work with a certain very highly qualified student because his wife would be jealous and suspicious of her."

7) Accusations of using sex to get ahead – One woman said, “I got the highest grade on a test in a computer science class. When I shared the good news, one of my male peers said, ‘I wish I could sleep with the professor so that I could get an A.’” Another said, “I had a co-worker tell me that the reason I got a promotion was because of my breast size.”

Robbyn Scribner, UWLP research fellow, said an overarching goal of the study is to equip women with the tools they need to better combat everyday sexism.

“To help with this, participants were asked to share responses they made, or wish they had made, to the unwanted comments,” she said.

Some women retorted with a question back to the commenter, while others provided information or education, offered a rebuttal, or used humor. In some cases, women responded to comments indirectly by changing the subject, laughing, or even agreeing with the commenter when they did not know how else to respond. Others shared that they felt ashamed, embarrassed, hurt, angry, or wished someone had stood up for them in the moment. Still others shared that they were so shocked or stunned that they did not say anything. Many participants reported responses they wish they had made once they had time to reflect. These afterthoughts ranged from clever comebacks, to providing information, to wishing they had reported the person.

“Speaking up against sexism can be a powerful force to reduce gender inequity,” said Madsen. “Being prepared to respond to everyday sexism can help women feel more confident in their interactions with others. By raising awareness, we can reduce the frequency of sexism in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and the state as a whole.”

An additional author of the report is April Townsend, UWLP research fellow.

To read the full report, [click here](#). For further information about the UWLP, visit utwomen.org.

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