Sexist Comments Prevalent, Utah Study Shows

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A recent study by the Utah State University Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) showed that sexist comments and remarks are prevalent in Utah and normalized in everyday conversation, public communication, and social settings.

The first of five research reports on the topic focuses on the comprehensive findings from the study. The following reports will provide more in-depth analysis and examples for each of the four themes that emerged, including inequity and bias, objectification, stereotypes, and undervaluing women.

The study was administered in the spring of 2020 through an online survey to a sample of Utah women ages 18 to 70+ who came from diverse backgrounds and situations. The survey consisted of three parts: participant demographic information, questions about perceptions of sexism in Utah, and an open response section inviting participants to share sexist comments they heard, along with responses they made, or wish they had made, to the commenter. Overall, 839 Utah women participated in the survey.

Susan Madsen, founding director of the UWLP and one of three report authors, said the study was conducted to educate the public on forms of sexist comments, both conscious and unconscious, and to equip women with the tools needed to better combat sexism.

“Specific examples are critical to better understand the many forms that sexist comments can take, whether blatant, subtle, aggressive, or unintentional,” she said.

Robbyn Scribner, UWLP research fellow, said that sexist comments often take people by surprise, leaving women wishing they were better prepared to respond and refute them.

“Language and related behaviors can demean and disempower women, even when people are not aware that their words are inappropriate,” she said. “In addition to helping understand sexism more fully, we also hope to equip women with the tools they need to better combat any sexism they encounter.”

Scribner said face-to-face confrontation with someone who makes sexist comments can be extremely difficult, so in an attempt to avoid backlash or retaliation, women often choose to ignore or minimize the sexism they experience.

The study showed five major responses to sexist comments: 1) no response, 470 mentions, 2) direct response, such as asking a question back to the commenter, providing information, a snarky response, or humor, 828 mentions, 3) emotional response, such as embarrassment or anger, 117 mentions, 4) indirect response such as laughing or changing the subject, 170 mentions, and 5) internal afterthoughts, 327 mentions.

“Since sexist comments are pervasive, and appropriate responses elusive, we designed this research study to collect and analyze the sexist comments women heard and the responses they made, or wish they had made,” Scribner said. “Preparation and education can be beneficial and empowering to all women.”

Madsen said it is crucial to raise awareness of the widespread occurrence and damaging effects of sexist language, comments, beliefs, and behaviors.

“Through this effort, we hope to reduce the frequency of sexism in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and the state as a whole,” she said.

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

Further information about the UWLP can be found at utwomen.org.
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