

Utah Women & Leadership Project Study: Sexist Comments Show Inequity and Bias

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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 five research reports will be created from the findings. This report focuses on one of four themes that emerged: inequity and bias. Upcoming reports will provide an analysis of the other themes including objectification, stereotypes, and undervaluing women.

The study was administered 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 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.

Four categories surfaced in the area of inequity and bias: 1) unconscious bias, 2) gender equity, 3) defensiveness/backlash against feminism, and 4) gender pay, promotion, and hiring inequity.

Susan Madsen, founding director of the UWLP and one of three report authors, said it is essential to provide education on the ways language and related behaviors can demean and disempower women, especially those who may not realize what they say or do is inappropriate.

"The examples women included in their responses are critical to helping us better understand the forms that sexist comments can take, whether blatant, subtle, aggressive, or unintentional," she said.

Category details and comments include:

1) Unconscious bias – These were comments related to broad stereotypes or beliefs held about women. They were most commonly made in the workplace by a man between the ages of 46 and 59 in a position of authority. One woman shared, "I was taking a standard exam, and the person running me through the timing/rules asked what score I was hoping for and told me it was 'a high score for a girl.'" Another said, "I'm a VP at my company. After an executive meeting, the CEO asked me, the only female in the meeting, 'so you'll share the notes?' No one asked me to take notes. It was an assumption that the only female would also play secretary."

2) Gender inequality – These included comments that disadvantaged or disparaged women because of their gender. They were most commonly made in the workplace by a man between 46 and 59 who had authority over the participant. One woman shared, "My manager said, 'Your peer will be representing the study you did because it will look better coming from a man.'" Another said, "My husband and I were appearing in court on the same case. We were both at counsel's table. The judge referred to me as my husband's 'side-kick.'"

3) Defensiveness/backlash against feminism – These comments demonstrated backlash against individuals, activities, or ideologies connected to feminism or in support of women's issues in general, including the Me Too movement. These were most often made by a male peer between the ages of 36 and 45. One woman shared, "He said, 'If women weren't seducing men in the workplace, then these '#metoo' situations wouldn't be happening.'" Another said, "He told me that having a successful career makes me intimidating to men and that I won't ever find someone to date and marry unless I tone things down."

4) Gender pay, promotion, and hiring inequity – These types of comments were most frequently made by a man between the ages of 36 and 59 in a position of authority over the participant. One woman said, "A boss used the excuse to pay women less because he would have a hard time if his wife made more money than him." Another shared, "A manager stated, 'You really should be promoted for all the work you do and the contributions you make. But you understand that he has a career here and a family to take care of. He needs the opportunity to make a name for himself. Besides, you will probably get married and leave, so it won't make any difference to you or your career.'"

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.

"In an effort to help with this, participants were asked to share responses they made, or wish they had made, to the comments," she said.

These included direct responses. One woman said, "After a comment about me staying home with my kids, I replied, 'How long do you think you're going to do this before you retire to become a stay-at-home dad?'" Not making a response was also common, since many women were stunned or didn't feel safe responding. In addition, internal afterthoughts ranged from clever comebacks to providing information to wishing they would have reported it.

"Speaking up against sexism can be a powerful force for reducing gender inequity," said Madsen. "It can help others challenge their own biases and it can model more equitable forms of communication. Being prepared to respond to everyday sexism can help women feel more confident in their interactions with others. By raising awareness of the widespread occurrence and damaging effects of sexist language, comments, and behaviors, we can reduce the frequency of sexism in our homes as well as our neighborhoods, communities, and the state as a whole."

An additional author of the study 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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