Sexism isn't just unfair—it makes women sick, study suggests

May 4 2018, by Catherine Harnois And Joao Luiz Bastos

Poor health over last 30 days

In a survey of 3,724 adults in the U.S., women reported more poor mental and physical health days over the past month compared to men.

	Poor mental health		Poor physical health
Women	3.6		2.7
Men	2.8		2.2

Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2018)

Recent social movements such as the Women's March, #MeToo, #TimesUp, #BalanceTonPorc (#OutYourPig), and #SayHerName draw attention to the broad spectrum gender-related violence that is pervasive in the United States and around the world.

Social science research takes a different form than protests, but paints a similar picture. A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men in the U.S. experience contact sexual violence in their lifetime. Contact sexual violence is defined as being made to have sexual intercourse with someone else, being sexually coerced, or having unwanted sexual

contact.

Other types of sexism, including [gender discrimination](#) and sexual harassment, are even more frequent. A 2016 [report](#) from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission estimates that between 25 percent to 85 percent of women in the U.S. experience workplace sexual harassment in their lifetimes.

We, a sociologist and a social epidemiologist, teamed up to find out the effects sexism has on people's health.

The big question: Does sexism hurt health?

Our [study](#), recently published in the [Journal of Health and Social Behavior](#), examined patterns of workplace discrimination and harassment in the U.S. and the consequences for physical and [mental health](#). We sought, first, to determine how pervasive these types of mistreatment were for women, as well as for men.

Our second goal was to determine whether sexism, along with other forms of discrimination and harassment, contributed to health disparities between women and men.

[Numerous studies](#) show that women tend to report worse health compared to men, and we wanted to see if workplace discrimination and harassment might be contributing to this disparity.

We used statistical methods to analyze data from the [U.S. General Social Survey](#), a national survey of English- and Spanish-speaking adults. The 2006, 2010 and 2014 surveys each contain a special section focusing on the quality of working life in the past year, including questions about discrimination in respondents' current job, as well as respondents' experiences with workplace sexual harassment and other forms of

harassment.

A total of 3,724 out of 5,579 economically active respondents across the three survey years answered all of the questions we analyzed, and this group forms the basis of our research. We used weighting procedures (i.e., numerical adjustments applied to groups of respondents which were either under or overrepresented in the sample, relative to their actual size in the population) in all our analyses, so that the GSS data would be reflective of the broader U.S. population.

As with other studies, our results showed that women report significantly worse mental and physical health compared to men. When asked, "Now thinking about your mental health, which includes stress, depression, and problems with emotions, for how many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?" women reported an average of 3.6 days of poor mental health in the past 30 days. Men, in comparison, reported significantly less: an average of 2.8 days. When asked about their days of poor physical health in the past 30 days, women reported an average of 2.7 days, with men reporting an average of 2.2 days.

Discrimination at work

In a survey of 3,724 adults in the U.S., women were more likely than men to report experiencing discrimination at their current job.
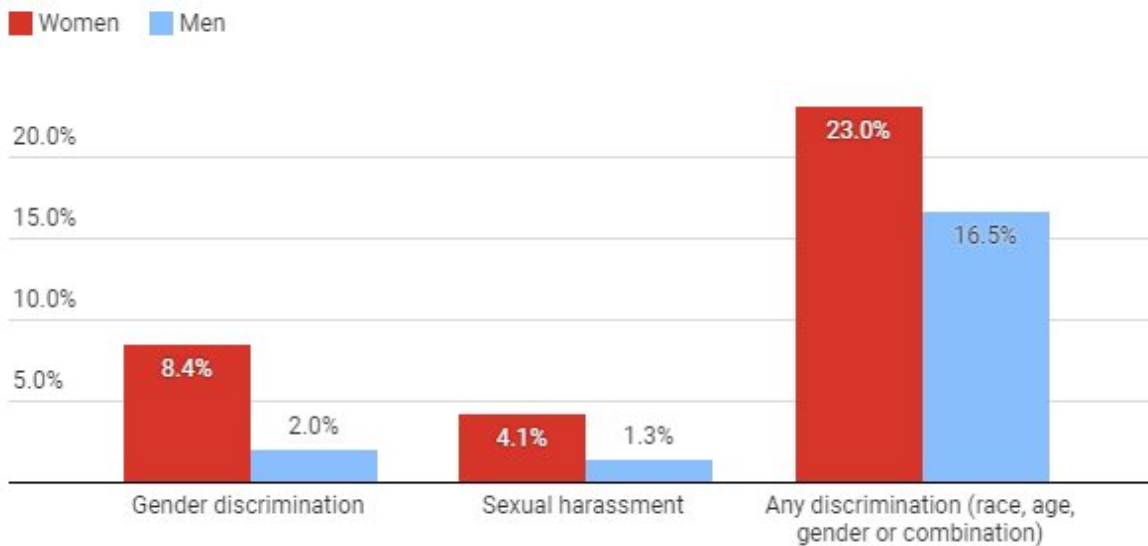
Credit: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Journal of Health and Social Behavior

Gender discrimination four times more often

Of the women surveyed, 8.4 percent reported experiencing gender discrimination in their current job, and 4.1 percent indicated they had experienced sexual harassment at work within the past 12 months. Some men reported workplace gender discrimination and sexual harassment too, but the percentage was significantly lower (2 percent and 1.3 percent respectively).

In addition to gender discrimination and sexual harassment, we also examined other forms of mistreatment in the workplace. We found that nearly a quarter of women, or 23 percent, indicated that they had either

experienced some form of discrimination, based on race, age, or gender, or a combination, in their current job or they had experienced some type of harassment in the past year. The rate of perceived workplace mistreatment among men was significantly lower at 16.5 percent.

How harassment hurts

One of the main goals of our study was to examine the relationship between workplace sexual harassment, gender discrimination and health outcomes. We used a range of sophisticated statistical techniques to assess these relationships, including multivariate regression models which estimated the effect of various forms of mistreatment on health outcomes, while accounting for other potential causes for ill health (age, low socioeconomic background, etc.).

We found that, among women, perceptions of gender discrimination are significantly associated with worse self-reported mental health. Women who perceived sexual harassment also reported worse physical health. We did not find a significant association between gender discrimination and sexual harassment with health outcomes among men, but this may be a result of the small number of men reporting these forms of mistreatment.

We also examined the combined effects of reporting multiple forms of discrimination and harassment. Here we found that respondents who perceived multiple forms of mistreatment reported significantly worse mental health than those who perceived no mistreatment, or just one form of mistreatment. Among women, the combination of age and gender discrimination was particularly detrimental for mental health. Women who reported experiencing both age and gender discrimination had an average of 9 days of poor mental health in the past 30 days.

Big reason for health gender gap

We wanted to know whether workplace mistreatment contributed to the gender gap in self-reported health. In other words, our statistical models were used to test whether sexism was a driver of the observed gender disparities in self-reported health.

Our results suggest that gender discrimination is responsible for around 9 to 10 percent of the gender gap in self-reported health. In other words, if we were to reduce the frequency of gender discrimination, we'd likely see a significant reduction in gender-based health inequality.

Overall, our results suggest that sexism takes a toll on women's health and well-being. The high frequency with which women experience sexism – at work and elsewhere – underscores the importance of viewing it not only as a social justice issue, but also a public health issue.

This article was originally published on The Conversation. Read the original article.

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