

# How we care for the environment may have social consequences

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Anyone can express their commitment to the environment through individual efforts, but some pro-environmental or "green" behaviors may be seen as either feminine or masculine, which Penn State researchers say may have social consequences.

In a series of studies, the researchers evaluated specific pro-environmental behaviors that previous research suggested were seen as either "feminine" or "masculine" and examined whether they affected how people were perceived.

They found that men and women were more likely to question a man's [sexual orientation](#) if he engaged in "feminine" pro-environmental behaviors, such as using reusable shopping bags. They were also more likely to question a woman's sexual orientation if she engaged in "masculine" pro-environmental behaviors, such as caulking windows.

Additionally, men were more likely to avoid women who were interested in "masculine" pro-environmental behaviors.

Janet K. Swim, professor of psychology, said it is important to understand these social consequences because they may hold people back from engaging in behaviors that could ultimately help the environment.

"There may be subtle, gender-related consequences when we engage in various pro-environmental behaviors," Swim said. "People may avoid

certain behaviors because they are managing the gendered impression they anticipate others will have of them. Or they may be avoided if the behaviors they choose do not match their gender."

According to the researchers, environmentalism in general may be seen as feminine because it fits in with women's traditional role as caregivers. Yet, particular pro-environmental behaviors can align with traditional feminine or masculine roles.

"Behaviors don't just help us accomplish something concrete, they also signal something about who we are," Swim said. "Line drying clothes or keeping tires at proper pressures may signal that we care about the environment, but if those behaviors are seen as gendered, they may signal other things, as well."

In three studies with a total of 960 participants, the researchers assessed impressions and avoidance of men and women engaging in "feminine" and "masculine" behaviors.

During the first two studies, participants read fictional summaries of a person's daily activities, which included either feminine, masculine or neutral pro-environmental behaviors. Participants then rated whether the person had masculine or feminine traits and guessed what the person's sexual orientation might be.

"Reflecting the tendency to see environmentalism as feminine, all the people were rated as more feminine than masculine regardless of the behaviors they did," Swim said. She also noted that the tendency was strongest when either women or men engaged in feminine behaviors.

The researchers found that participants whose behaviors conformed to their gender were seen as more heterosexual than those whose behaviors did not conform to their gender, which may suggest participants were

using [traditional gender roles](#) as clues to sexual identity.

Additionally, the researchers indicated that while participants did not view the nonconformists as gay or lesbian, their ratings suggested that on average they were uncertain about whether the person was heterosexual.

"If being seen as heterosexual is important to a person, that person may prioritize gender-conforming over gender-nonconforming pro-environmental behaviors in anticipation of how others might see them," Swim said.

The researchers did a third study to examine whether people avoided others based on the other person's pro-environmental behavior preferences. In a room with several other people, participants completed a digital survey where they indicated which environmental topics they would like to discuss with a partner.

The participants were then given a list of what they believed to be the topic preferences of four other participants. The list included a woman and a man who preferred discussing gender-conforming behaviors, as well as a woman and a man who preferred gender-nonconforming behaviors. The participants were then asked to rank whom they would prefer to be partnered with in order of preference.

The researchers found that women avoided men more than women, as well as people who were interested in masculine rather than feminine behaviors. According to the researchers, although women's partner preferences showed gender biases, these preferences did not seem to be based on whether other's behaviors conformed to gender roles or not.

In contrast, the researchers found that men were more likely to distance themselves from women engaging in masculine behaviors than any of the other three potential partners. They were equally interested in partnering

with women engaging in feminine behaviors and men who engaged in masculine or feminine behaviors.

The researchers said these results suggested that compared to men, women were more likely to experience negative social consequences from men for engaging in non-gender role-conforming pro-environmental behaviors.

"We were surprised that it was only [women](#) who experienced being avoided if they engaged in nonconforming gender-role behaviors," Swim said. "We can't say why this is happening, but it is a social consequence. Women may be experiencing this negative feedback and might not know why."

The researchers said that the paper—recently published in the journal *Sex Roles*—underlines the importance of continuing to study gender stereotypes surrounding environmentalism and its associated behaviors. They added that activists and policymakers who are trying to promote pro-environmental behaviors may want to take these pressures to conform to [gender](#) roles into account as possible barriers.

In the future, Swim said she and her fellow researchers will continue to study the effects of pro-environmental behaviors, such as whether social repercussions affect whether a person is willing to do a behavior or not.

**More information:** Janet K. Swim et al, Gender Bending and Gender Conformity: The Social Consequences of Engaging in Feminine and Masculine Pro-Environmental Behaviors, *Sex Roles* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-019-01061-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01061-9)

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