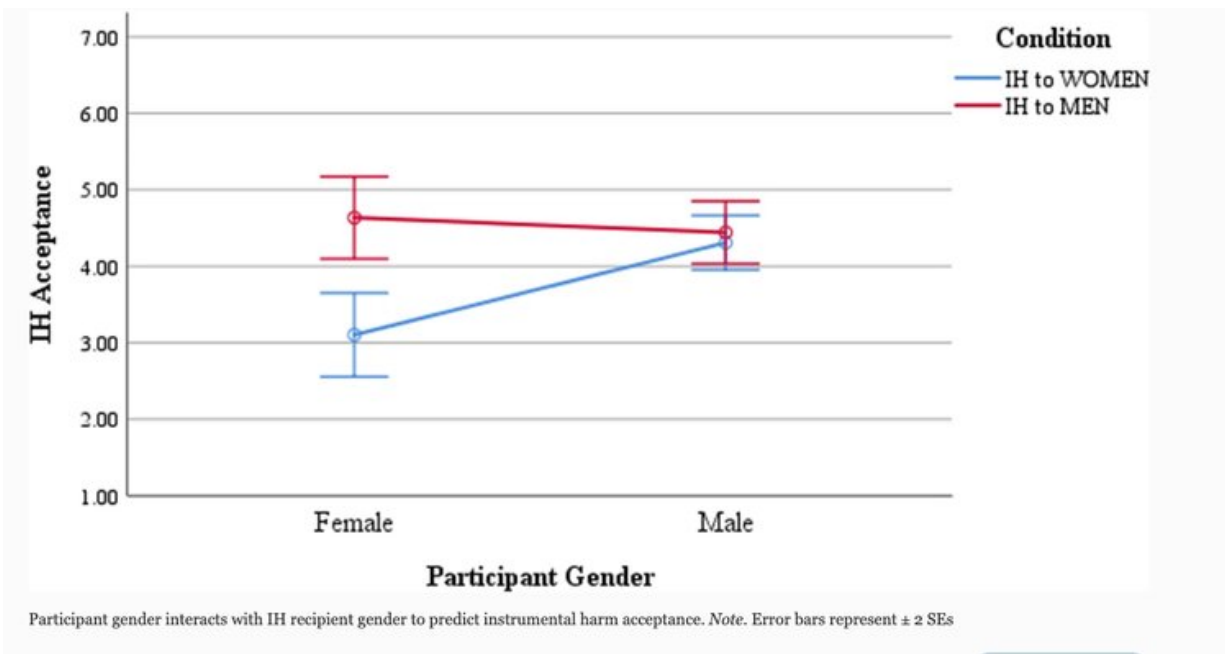


# Research examines how gender impacts choices

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IH= instrumental harm. Credit: University of New Mexico

When considering laws, workplace policies or school rules, one might take notice of whom they impact. New research from the University of New Mexico has found whether it's interventions to reduce workplace bullying, help with weight loss, or enhance student engagement, people show a gender bias in how they feel.

UNM Psychology Assistant Professor Tania Reynolds has published new research that shows people prefer interventions when they inflict damage onto men instead of women. The paper is published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.

She and her international colleagues Maja Graso and Karl Aquino discovered this through three different studies, each using a variety of scenarios.

Previous work by Reynolds has found that people show a bias in their tendency to label individuals as victims or perpetrators, known as moral typecasting. Her work found that people more readily stereotyped women as victims and men as perpetrators.

"People's assumptions of who's a victim and who's a perpetrator differs by gender. People tend to stereotype men as perpetrators and women as victims. This project built upon those findings by examining how people evaluate harm, when that harm is unintended and results from interventions aimed at helping people," Reynolds said.

Many times, there are interventions which are equal and don't adversely affect one population over another. Still, there are plenty of instances in which policies or interventions carry negative externalities, known as collateral harm.

"Most policies have trade-offs whereby some individuals are benefitted, and some are either not affected or actively harmed," Reynolds said.

"How do people evaluate these costs? If it's the case that one gender benefits while the other is harmed, might that influence whether people evaluate the [intervention](#) or policy as worthwhile?"

Graso and Reynolds presented participants with scenarios describing various interventions, such as programs to reduce workplace harassment,

[medical treatment](#) for [chronic pain](#), and interventions to increase students' feelings of belonging in the classroom.

For each program participants evaluated, they were told that the intervention benefitted one gender, but harmed the other. However, participants were randomly assigned to a gender condition, so sometimes men were helped and women harmed, or vice versa.

"Maybe there is some program that gets implemented statewide or across an educational system, or within organizations where one sex doesn't like it or experiences collateral harm," Reynolds said.

People preferred when men were harmed and women benefited, but across both of those studies, it was pretty much [female participants](#) that showed the gender bias, not male participants. Women don't want other women being harmed, whereas men seem to be even more evenhanded, where they were equally likely to endorse the treatments or interventions, whether they harmed men or women.

"In this context, people were more supportive of the intervention if men found it offensive than if women found it offensive," Reynolds said.

"They more strongly supported interventions if men suffered health impairments, decrements in learning, increase in chronic pain, or decreased motivation to gain employment, compared to when women suffered those same exact costs."

More often than not, women and those who identified as feminists, gave a thumbs up when policies negatively affected men, while preferring those that benefited women.

That was the case across each scenario.

"What we found is that beyond just participants' sex, people who more

strongly endorsed egalitarianism or feminism showed these gender biases to larger degrees," Reynolds said.

There are theories as to why these decisions were made. Although there are no sure-fire explanations, Reynolds thinks there is a historical element.

"Both of those ideologies have to do with rectifying historical injustices, so maybe it's part of the reason why people endorse harm to men," she said. "Throughout history, women have typically had to sacrifice in contexts like caring for the elderly or infants. Likewise women have not had the same career or educational opportunities. Perhaps people who identify as feminists or egalitarians perceive men to have benefited throughout history, and therefore they now evaluate it as fair if men suffer and women gain an advantage."

She also thinks some credit could go to evolutionary psychology. Throughout [human history](#), many societies practiced patrilocality, where women resided with their husbands' families instead of their own.

"Women were with their husbands' families, and they were trying to figure out who they could trust in this group when they might not have known anyone. Women needed to find ways of recruiting female allies and figuring out who to trust," Reynolds said. "Perhaps the women that demonstrated their allegiance to and care for other women were more often chosen as allies. That is, perhaps having a pro-women bias allowed women to better recruit social support."

Reynolds believes there are major societal implications in these patterns of findings. For example, female policy makers might advance policies that minimize harm to women, but maybe not to men.

"Is intervention or policy worthwhile? We have a hard time putting our

personal preferences to the side and who knows, maybe we shouldn't. It's just worth noting that there is this bias, so that way we can be fully informed about the policies that we adopt or interventions that we implement. We might not be as even handed as we think we are," she said.

She recommends applying the veil of ignorance when deciding how to intervene fairly.

"What is considered fair is if you were to trade places with someone else, would you want the same outcome? I think that that might be a good way of deciding whether something is fair. You could blind people to who was harmed and ask them if that harm is acceptable," Reynolds said.

Either way, there is much more to explore when it comes to understanding the sources of these biases.

"I would be interested in intertwining my two lines of research on harm evaluation and the challenges faced by our female ancestors across human history," Reynolds said. "Perhaps one way that you could test whether women tend to prefer other women who have pro-female biases is by presenting female participants with a hypothetical who either generally takes the side of women or shows no gender preference. I'd be curious which woman do women prefer as their friend."

Although this [innovative research](#) took time and patience, Reynolds believes it's well worth it.

"We had a hard time getting this paper published. It goes to show you have to be resilient and believe in your work," Reynolds said. "It's a nice feeling and makes the research worth it—a good reminder persistence pays off."

**More information:** Maja Graso et al, Worth the Risk? Greater Acceptance of Instrumental Harm Befalling Men than Women, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10508-023-02571-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-023-02571-0)

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