

RESEARCH BRIEF

The Effects of Sexism on American Women: The Role of Norms vs. Discrimination

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2018-56, "[The Effects of Sexism on American Women: The Role of Norms vs. Discrimination](#)," by Kerwin Kofi Charles, professor, UChicago's Harris School of Public Policy; Jonathan Guryan, professor, Northwestern University; and Jessica Pan, associate professor, National University Singapore

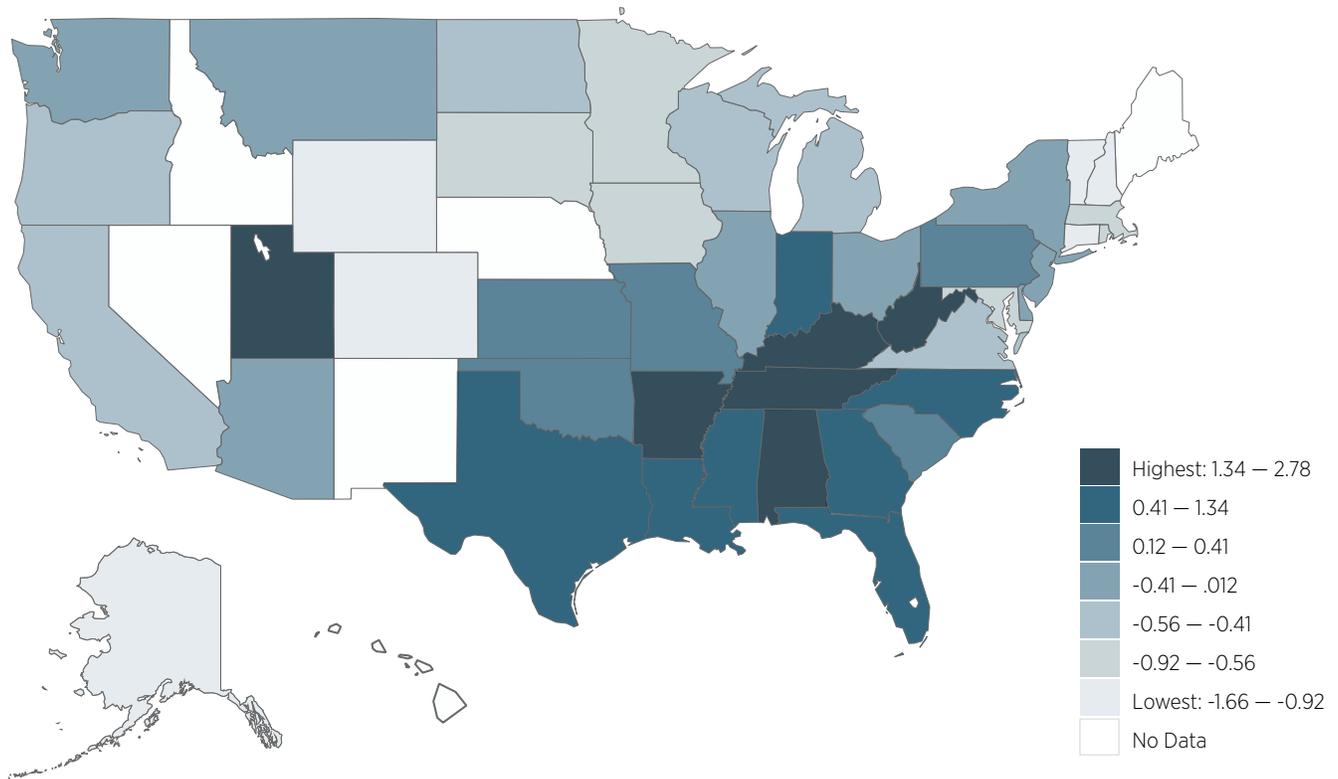
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Sexism experienced during formative years stays with girls into adulthood
- ✓ These background norms can influence choices that women make and affect their life outcomes
- ✓ In addition, women face different levels of sexism and discrimination in the states where they live as adults
- ✓ Sexism varies across states and can have a significant impact on a woman's wages and labor market participation, and can also influence her marriage and fertility rates

Imagine two girls who grew up as friends on the same street, in the same rural town, where they attended the same church and schools, and generally shared the same cultural experiences through high school. Eventually, these two girls become adults and end up living in different places, perhaps hundreds of miles apart. Now imagine two other adult women who live in the same place but who were raised in different places.

What type of life experiences will these women have in terms of the work they do and the wages they earn? Will they get married and, if so, how young? If they have children, when will they start to raise a family? How many children will they have? According to the authors of the new BFI working paper, "[The Effects of Sexism on American Women: The Role of Norms vs. Discrimination](#)," the answers to those questions depend crucially on where women are born and where they choose to live their adult lives.

Mean Overall Sexism in the US



Note: Data are from several years of the General Social Survey (GSS). See working paper for further details.

Kerwin Kofi Charles, professor at the Harris School of Public Policy, and his colleagues employ a novel approach that examines how prevailing sexist beliefs shape life outcomes for women. Essentially, they find that sexism affects women through two channels: one is their own preferences that are shaped by where they grow up, and the other is the sexism they experience in the place they choose to live as adults.

On average, not all states are average

The average American woman's socioeconomic outcomes have improved dramatically over the past 50 years. Her wages and probability of employment, relative to the average man's, have risen steadily over that time. She is also marrying later and bearing children later, as well as having fewer total children. However, these are national averages and these phenomena

do not hold in all states across America. Indeed, the gap between men and women that existed in a particular state 50 years ago is largely the same size today. In other words, if a state exhibited less gender discrimination 50 years ago, it retains that narrower gap today; a state that exhibited more discrimination in 1970 has a similarly wide gap today.

Much research over the years has focused on broad national trends when measuring sexism and its effect on women's lives. A primary contribution of this paper is that it documents cross-state differences in women's outcomes and incorporates non-market factors, like cultural norms. The focus of the authors' analysis are the four outcomes described above: wages, employment, marriage, and fertility. Of the many forms sexism might take, the authors focus on negative or stereotypical beliefs about whether women should enter

the workplace or remain at home. Specifically, sexism prevails in a market when residents believe that:

- women’s capacities are inferior to men;
- families are hurt when women work;
- and men and women should adhere to strict roles in society.

These cultural norms are not only forces that occur to women from external sources, but they are forces that also exist within women, and are strongly affected by where a woman is raised. For example, a girl may grow up within a culture that prizes stay-at-home mothers over working moms, as well as early marriages and large families. These are what the authors describe as background norms, and they are able to estimate the influence of these background norms throughout adulthood by comparing women who were born in one place and moved to different places, and those who were born in different places and moved to the same place.

Once a woman reaches adulthood and chooses a place to live, she is then influenced by discrimination in the labor market and by what the authors term residential sexism, or those current norms that they experience in their new hometown. On the question of who engages in sexist behavior, men and/or women, the authors are clear: men are the purveyors of discrimination in the market (whether women are hired for or promoted to certain jobs), and women determine norms (or residential sexism) that influence such outcomes as marriage and fertility.

The authors conduct a number of rigorous tests based on a broad array of data to reach their conclusions about women’s wages, their labor force participation relative to men, and the ages at which women aged 20-40 married and had their first child. For example, their information on sexism comes from the General Social Survey (GSS), which is a nationally representative survey that asks respondents various questions, among others, about their attitudes or beliefs about women’s place in society.

Sexism affects women through two channels: one is their own preferences that are shaped by where they grow up, and the other is the sexism they experience in the place they choose to live as adults.

Conclusion

The authors reveal how prevailing sexist beliefs about women's abilities and appropriate roles affect US women's socioeconomic outcomes. Studying adults who live in one state but who were born in another, they show that sexism in a woman's state of birth and in her current state of residence both lower her wages and likelihood of labor force participation, and lead her to marry and bear her first child sooner. The sexism a woman experiences where she was raised, or background sexism, affects a woman's outcomes even after she is an adult living in another place through the influence of norms that she internalized during her formative years.

Further, the sexism present where a woman lives (residential sexism) affects her non-labor market outcomes through the influence of prevailing sexist beliefs of other women where she lives. By contrast, residential sexism's effects on her labor market outcomes seem to operate chiefly through the mechanism of market discrimination by sexist men.

Finally, and importantly, the authors' find sound evidence that prejudice-based discrimination, undergirded by prevailing sexist beliefs that vary across space, may be an important driver of women's outcomes in the US.

CLOSING TAKEAWAY

By studying adults who were born in one place but live in another, the authors reveal the effects of sexism on women's outcomes in the market through discrimination (wages and jobs), as well as in non-market settings through cultural norms (marriage and fertility).

READ THE WORKING PAPER

NO. 2018-56 · AUGUST 2018

The Effects of Sexism on American Women: The Role of Norms vs. Discrimination

bfi.uchicago.edu/Charles-WP-201856

MORE ABOUT



Kerwin Kofi Charles

*Edwin A. and Betty L. Bergman Distinguished
Service Professor, Harris School of Public Policy*

harris.uchicago.edu/directory/kerwin-charles

