

High levels of sexism fuel poor mental health among women

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Credit: Pixabay

One in five women report sex discrimination and these women are more likely to develop poorer mental health after the sexist experience, according to a new UCL study investigating links between sexism and mental health and wellbeing.

The study, published today in *Health Psychology*, analyzed data from nearly 3,000 women from The UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) over a period of four years. Few men reported [sex discrimination](#) so were not included in the analysis. Participants provided information on perceived sexism and their mental [health](#) status in 2009/10 and then again in 2013/14.

The researchers found that women who reported sex discrimination (which included feeling unsafe, avoiding certain places, being insulted and being physically attacked) were three times more likely to report [clinical depression](#) and were more likely to develop poorer mental health over the following four years.

Lead author, Dr. Ruth Hackett (UCL Epidemiology & Health Care) said: "We found that women who reported perceived sex discrimination were more likely to be depressed and have greater psychological distress, as well as poorer mental functioning, life satisfaction and self-rated health.

"There are several possible explanations for the link between sexism and poorer mental health. Sexism may serve as a barrier to healthy lifestyles that promote mental wellbeing, for example, if women avoid exercising in settings they perceive to be unsafe or use substances to cope with discriminatory experiences. Repeated exposure to stress may also lead to 'wear and tear' that disrupts normal biological processes."

The most common settings in which perceived sex discrimination was reported were outside in the street (77%), on public transport (39.9%), and at or around bus or train stations (38.9%). Sex discrimination was less frequently reported in school or workplace settings (12%) or in the home environment (10.5%).

Those who reported perceived sex discrimination were younger on average than those who did not report discrimination. They were also

more likely to be white (23.8% vs. 16.3%), wealthier based on monthly household income and better educated than those who did not report sex discrimination, with a greater proportion holding university degrees (48.1% vs 32.2%).

Dr. Hackett added: "Our results highlight the need to reduce sexism in our society, not only to promote equality between the sexes, but also to reduce avoidable mental wellbeing issues in [women](#)."

Dr. Sarah Jackson (UCL Epidemiology & Health Care), senior author on the study, commented: "The issue of sex discrimination is one that has garnered increasing attention over recent years in the wake of the Me Too movement. Our results are particularly concerning in suggesting an enduring impact of experiences of sex [discrimination](#) on mental health and wellbeing. They underscore the importance of tackling sexism not only as a moral problem but one that may have a lasting legacy on [mental health](#)."

Provided by University College London

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