Why do some women deny gender discrimination?

Abstract

Women face discrimination across the world. They have fewer rights and opportunities (like education) than men, all because of their gender. And the COVID-19 pandemic has made this worse.

But despite this, many people (including women) deny that gender discrimination exists. Even people who have experienced it personally! We wanted to find out why this is. We thought that perhaps it’s because denying discrimination makes the world seem fairer. This makes women happier.

We carried out three studies, involving 20,000 participants from 23 countries altogether. We tested the hypothesis that denial of gender discrimination is related to better well-being in women.

We found this to be true across the United States and worldwide. In fact, in countries where gender discrimination is worse, women were even more likely to deny it! Denial of discrimination helps women to cope, but it makes gender inequality worse.

Introduction

In every country in the world, women are treated differently from men. Women get less pay than men for the same work. They’re also less likely to reach top positions at work. Women even suffer from having to take time off work to have a child, but men don’t.

And it’s not just at work. In some countries, women still don’t have the right to vote. And all too often, women are victims of violence at the hands of men.

We call this gender discrimination, and it affects the lives of women and girls everywhere. It’s a fact – women earn less money, have fewer rights, and are more likely to be physically harmed. This is all bad for their well-being. It’s a huge issue since women are over half of the world’s population!

We should be upset. But there’s a lack of outrage about gender discrimination, even among women. Both women and men are denying that it’s even an issue! What’s more, it seems as though people who live in countries where gender discrimination is worse are even less likely to recognize it at all. How does this make sense!? We wanted to understand why people – especially women – might deny that gender discrimination exists. We carried out three different studies to test:

- whether denial (versus recognition) of gender discrimination is related to women having better well-being – and if so, why.
- how it varies among countries with different levels of gender inequality.

Photo credit: William Chen, CC BY-SA 4.0
Methods

We carried out three studies, with over 20,000 participants in total!

Study 1

First, we asked 793 people living in the United States to complete an online survey.

We asked questions about things like their income, age, and relationship, and then about:
- whether they recognized and/or had experienced discrimination.
- how happy they were with their life.

For each question, participants gave a score based on how much they agreed (Figure 1). For example, for a statement like "Working women are treated more poorly by their boss compared to men," a higher score meant more denial of discrimination.

Study 2

We then repeated a similar survey, but this time with 5,225 Americans.

Again, we measured how much people deny discrimination by using a scale. We used questions like "How serious a problem is discrimination against women in the United States?"

Study 3

Our third survey included 17,131 participants from 23 different countries!

We asked how much they believe that “Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in this country.”

We also asked them to rate their level of happiness.

We then used data from the World Values Survey to measure each country’s level of gender discrimination (or sexism). However, data was not available for one of the 23 countries where we surveyed people.

Results

We found that:
- Women who deny gender discrimination are happier with their lives. They have better well-being.
- Women who recognized gender discrimination were not as happy with their lives.
- Men deny discrimination more than women.

People were more likely to deny gender discrimination in countries with higher levels of sexism! (See Fig. 2.) For example, people living in Russia were more likely to deny it than people living in France.
Can you describe the relationship between the level of sexism in a country and how much the people there denied gender discrimination? Where was denial most common?

**Discussion**

Gender discrimination is a huge problem across the world. But we found that women who deny discrimination are actually happier. **We think that this denial is actually a way for women to cope, making the world seem fairer.** But it actually makes gender discrimination even worse.

Recognizing that this discrimination exists is painful for women – especially in countries with high gender inequality. But we shouldn’t deny it. Instead, we should challenge it. And this isn’t just a problem for women – everyone should take action!

So, how do we recognize gender discrimination? What does it look like? “Old-fashioned” forms of gender discrimination come from men apparently having superior skills and abilities. In the workplace, women are thought of as less able to do “men’s” work and get fewer promotions and less pay. At home, they are expected to do much more (or all) of the housework and childcare.

**These days, gender discrimination can be a little bit harder to spot.** For example, women are far more likely to be interrupted while speaking than men are. They also experience more sexual harassment at work. People may not even realize they’re behaving in a sexist way – but that doesn’t excuse them.

**Conclusion**

Everyone should be able to be who they are, without experiencing discrimination. Let’s work together to fight gender discrimination and really make the world a fairer place! So, what can we do to help?

- Don’t stand for gender discrimination. When you see it, call it out.
- Has one of your friends said or done something sexist? If you feel safe enough, speak to them about it! Maybe they didn’t even realize it.
- You could also tell a teacher. If they are aware of the problem, they can step in and be part of the solution.
- Talk about your own experiences of discrimination, if you feel comfortable. This helps other people to become more aware of gender discrimination.
- Listen and support others when they talk about their experiences.
Glossary of Key Terms

**Discrimination** – Discrimination is treating someone (or a group of people) unfairly based on their characteristics.

**Gender** – Gender is used to describe the characteristics of women and men that make them “feminine” or “masculine”. Gender is a social idea, so it’s different from sex, which is biologically determined.

**Gender discrimination** – Put together, gender discrimination refers to treating men and women, or boys and girls, differently based on their gender identity. For example, telling boys that they should be good at math and science, and girls that they should be good at art and languages.

**Gender inequality** – Gender discrimination leads to men being better off than women, all across the world. This is gender inequality, and it’s worse in some countries (like Poland) than others (like Sweden – a country with more gender equality).

**Right to vote** – The legal entitlement of a person to vote in their country’s elections. Women still aren’t allowed to vote in a number of countries, like Saudi Arabia.

**Sexism** – Discrimination or prejudice (having an opinion of someone that isn’t actually based on experience) because of a person’s sex or gender.

**Well-being** – Having good well-being means that you are happy (have good mental health), satisfied with your life, and have good physical health. There are lots of things you can do to improve your mental and physical well-being, like practicing mindfulness and eating well.

We found that some women deny gender discrimination. Why? And how does this vary between different countries?

Denying that gender discrimination exists actually makes it worse. Why do you think this is?

Women are treated differently from men at work and at home. How?

Gender discrimination and inequality doesn’t just affect women. Can you think of some examples of how gender discrimination and sexism hurts men?

Can you think of some other types of discrimination?

REFERENCES


Acknowledgment: This article’s adaptation was supported by the Goggio Family Foundation.