

# Gender Bias

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Gender bias is behavior that shows favoritism toward one gender over another. Most often, gender bias is the act of favoring men and/or boys over women and/or girls. However, this is not always the case. In order to define gender bias completely, we first must make a distinction between the terms gender and sex. When we use the term *gender*, we mean socially constructed expectations and roles for women and men, for girls and boys. Specifically, girls and women are expected to demonstrate feminine behavior, and boys and men are expected to act masculine. By *sex*, we mean biological differences assigned to females and males in order to distinguish between the two. The biological characteristics assigned to females and males often consist of primary or secondary sex characteristics.

The term gender bias is often (wrongly) used interchangeably with the term sexism. *Sexism* is typically defined as the subordination of one sex, usually female, based on the assumed superiority of the other sex (Kendall 2013) or an ideology that defines females as different from and inferior to males (Andersen & Taylor 2013). Sex is the basis for the prejudice and presumed inferiority implicit in the term sexism. The term *gender bias* is more inclusive than the term sexism, as it includes both prejudice (attitudes) and discrimination (behavior) in its definition.

Studies of gender bias also focus on gender, rather than on sex. Furthermore, the term gender bias could include instances of bias against boys and men in addition to bias against girls and women. This raises an important question: Are boys and men harmed by gender bias? While individual boys and men may suffer at the hands of gender bias, boys and men as groups benefit from gender bias embedded in our social institutions. The narrow benefits of gender bias for some are outweighed by much broader losses for all (Neubeck & Glasberg 2005). And if gender roles and expectations constrain both girls and

boys and both women and men, it can be said that gender bias limits the overall development of contemporary societies.

## Gender Bias: Pervasive Influence

Gender bias is part of almost every aspect of life. The most common areas of gender bias are found in the social institutions of families, education, the economy, and health.

## Within the Household

At the household level, there is documented evidence of gender bias in the allocation of resources. Patriarchal households are maintained through power and control in the hands of men, particularly fathers, as the heads of households. Specifically, gendered roles assigned as “breadwinner husband” and “homemaker wife” lead to unequal distributions of power within the household. However, the numbers of dual-income families and female-headed households are growing rapidly in the US. Consequently, women’s and men’s attitudes towards sharing work in the household have changed over the years. Both women and men often face conflict between work and family. The juggling of work and family is complicated by the power differences between women and men in families, and these power differences often confirm gender roles, with women typically desiring more change than men (Andersen 2010). Along these lines of power differentials, gender bias within families can come in the form of violence as well. While it is certainly not the case in every family, women are significantly more likely than men to be physically abused and injured by their intimate partners (Renzetti, Curran, & Maier 2012).

## In Education

Gender bias is embedded in education from pre-kindergarten through graduate school.

Teachers provide important messages about gender through both the formal content of their instruction and materials utilized, as well as informal interactions with students (which is commonly referred to as the hidden curriculum). Gender-related messages from teachers and other students often reinforce gender roles first taught at home (Kendall 2013; Rothchild 2006).

Researchers have consistently found that teachers give more time, effort, and attention to boys than to girls (Sadker & Sadker 1994). Gender bias exists in textbooks and instructional materials as well. Women are often under-represented in course materials and/or are presented in stereotypical roles. Over time, gender bias in education can undermine girls' and women's self-esteem and discourage them from taking courses such as math, science, and engineering (Kendall 2013; Raffalli 1994).

### In the Economy

While it is estimated that 60 percent of all women work in the paid labor force (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012), women, on average, occupy a weaker position in the labor market than men. Specifically, they are more likely to be unemployed, employed in temporary jobs, or employed part-time. Because of gender bias embedded in the labor market, women in the US are paid, on average, 86 cents to every dollar in wages that men are paid (Rich 2014). Rates for women of color are even lower: 69.6 cents for African American women and 59.8 cents for Latinas (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). More than one million women work in jobs that pay less than the federal minimum wage (Neubeck & Glasberg 2005). Sociologists have argued that this is not a reflection of educational differences between women and men; rather, it is a product of gender bias in employment, promotion, and pay. The gender-biased economic system encourages women to go into traditional "women's jobs," and this serves employers well: They are able to pay women lower salaries for traditional "women's jobs" than for traditional "men's jobs."

### In Health

The US healthcare system has long been dominated by men – from doctors to researchers to administrators. While more and more women are entering medical school and medical-related fields, gender bias is still embedded in the system. As discussed above, women, on average, make up a weaker position in the labor market than men. Thus, they are less likely to occupy positions that offer adequate healthcare insurance, even when they work full time (Neubeck & Glasberg 2005). Female-headed households are affected by this most strongly, as they are more likely to be poor than male-headed or dual-headed households.

Biases and shortcomings in the healthcare system's treatment of women contribute to the problems women face in getting adequate medical care (Conrad & Leiter 2013; Ratcliff 2002). Specifically, gender bias embedded in the US healthcare system contributes to very little research done on health problems pertaining to women. For example, women have historically been excluded as research subjects in studies sponsored by the federal National Institutes of Health (NIH) (Vidaver et al. 2004).

### Conclusion

In addition to the social institutions reviewed here, gender bias is embedded in the media, sports, the state/government, and other social institutions. Gender is so pervasive in contemporary society that we often do not notice gender bias in our everyday lives. However, gender itself is not a variable that stands alone. Our race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and other social positions affect our everyday gendered experiences. Therefore, gender bias regularly intersects with other forms of bias such as ethnocentrism, racism, classism, and homophobia.

While it may appear gender bias disadvantages girls and women the most, gender bias, as well as other forms of bias, shortchanges all of us.

SEE ALSO: Gender Ideology and Gender Role Ideology; Gender Mainstreaming;

Gender Oppression; Gendered Organizations/Institutions; Intersectionality; Sex and Gender

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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