

## How Experiences of Sexism Erode Psychological Wellbeing and Resilience of Women?

**Samra Lodi and Nasheed Imtiaz**

Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

This study explores the impact of sexism on women's psychological well-being and resilience. It also explores the critical predictors of sexism among women. By utilizing a purposive sampling technique, 100 samples were collected. This study uses various scales, such as the Everyday Sexism Scale, Psychological Well-Being Scale, and Brief Resilience Scale, for data collection. By highlighting the psychological toll of everyday sexism, this research underscores the need for supportive social policies and educational programs that foster resilience in women. The findings from this study can provide direction for workplaces, schools, and mental health practitioners to develop environments that support women's wellness, thus aiding in creating a more equal society. Future research should explore additional factors and extend this analysis to other marginalized populations, broadening understanding of how individuals can effectively counteract the mental health impacts of sexism.

**Keywords:** sexism, psychological wellbeing, resilience, women

"The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says: It's a girl." - Shirley Chisholm

If we define sexism as the set of attitudes that create and maintain a gender hierarchy resulting in disadvantages for women, then it sadly remains the most widespread and pervasive of all prejudices in modern society. The global assignment of gender roles results in a systematic disadvantage for women, who consistently hold lower status and have less access to resources and power than men (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). In a society that often purports to champion gender equality, the insidious nature of everyday sexism continues to undermine the resilience of women. While both men and women can experience such discrimination, research indicates that women are disproportionately targeted, particularly in positions of vulnerability or subordination (Akanke, 1992). Sexism, a pervasive form of gender-based discrimination, has far-reaching

implications on the psychological wellbeing of women. It manifests in various forms, ranging from overt acts of hostility to more subtle microaggressions, all of which contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Research has consistently highlighted that experiences of sexism, whether encountered in professional, social, or personal domains, can significantly erode psychological wellbeing by fostering feelings of helplessness, diminished self-worth, and chronic stress (Swim et al., 2001). These experiences not only affect women's mental health but also hinder their ability to navigate challenges and fulfill their potential.

The adverse effects of sexism are particularly concerning due to their cyclical nature—psychological distress arising from such experiences may reduce an individual's capacity to cope, thereby exacerbating vulnerability to future stressors (like sexism). While there is a wealth of research exploring sexism, psychological wellbeing, and resilience as individual constructs, there

remains a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to examine the interplay of these variables in a unified framework. This paper aims to explore how experiences of sexism undermine women's psychological wellbeing and resilience.

### **Sexism**

Sexism refers to prejudice and discrimination based on a person's sex or gender, resulting in unequal treatment and opportunities. The term "sexism" emerged during the 1960s, within the context of second-wave feminism, likely drawing conceptual influence from the civil rights movement's use of the term "racism." Its introduction served to underscore the existence of systemic gender-based discrimination and deeply embedded prejudices, thereby highlighting the structural inequalities perpetuated within various socio-cultural and institutional frameworks. Klonoff and Landrine (1995) reported that nearly all women (99%) had encountered at least one instance of sexism during their lifetime, with 97% experiencing such events within the past year. The most commonly reported incidents involved exposure to sexually degrading jokes, harassment, being labeled with sexist names, and being treated disrespectfully. Furthermore, younger women, unmarried women, and those belonging to ethnic minority groups were found to be more vulnerable to experiencing sexist events (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995). Studies have consistently found that the vast majority of women report experiencing sexist events, ranging from sexist jokes and harassment to a lack of respect and being treated in a degrading manner (Oswald et al., 2018). Research has shown that recurring distressing experiences and conditions, such as exposure to social expectations and gender-based discrimination, can negatively affect mental health more significantly than isolated adverse events (Oswald et al., 2018). Exposure to various forms of sexism -

seemingly positive yet ultimately limiting attitudes and behaviors based on traditional gender roles - can undermine women's self-conceptions and social orientations (Miller et al., 1979).

Everyday sexism manifests in myriad ways, from dismissive or patronizing attitudes in professional settings to unsolicited commentary on physical appearance, unwanted advances, and the policing of women's behavior and choices (Swim et al., 2001 ; Szymanski et al., 2011). According to Grabe, Hyde and Lindberg (2007), women who report being sexually victimized tend to experience higher levels of self-objectification and body shame, leading to negative psychological effects such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. This has been supported by reviews conducted by Fitzgerald et al. (1997). These individuals face an intersection of barriers, including higher levels of anxiety, depression, and difficulties in accessing support services for gender-based violence (Heijden et al., 2019). The internalization of socio-cultural pressures and the struggle to balance contradictory expectations further contributes to the erosion of psychological wellbeing among adolescent girls (Gustafsson et al., 2011). Ultimately, the pervasive and multifaceted nature of everyday sexism poses a significant challenge to women's mental health and overall flourishing. (Heijden et al., 2019 ; Oswald et al., 2018 ; Gustafsson et al., 2011).

### **Psychological wellbeing**

Two primary approaches in the literature of wellbeing are known as: the hedonic and the eudaimonic. The hedonistic approach centers on subjective well-being, which emphasizes life satisfaction and emotional states, characterized by high levels of positive emotions and low levels of negative emotions (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In contrast, the eudaimonic approach is concerned with

psychological well-being, encompassing six dimensions of optimal functioning: self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, life purpose, and personal growth (Ryff, 1995; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). These frameworks provide complementary perspectives on the multifaceted nature of well-being and enhance our understanding of the construct. Apart from experiencing high positive emotions and satisfaction in life, engaging in purposeful activities is equally important, as highlighted by this integrated view.

Maintaining psychological well-being is a crucial aspect of overall health and wellness, and understanding the unique factors that influence the mental and emotional states of women is of paramount importance. While research on the topic has expanded in recent years, there is still a need to further clarify the nuances of psychological well-being among women from diverse cultural, social, and demographic backgrounds (Wissing & Eeden, 2002 ; Trudel Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Psychological well-being is associated with flexible and creative thinking (Ashby, Isen, & Turken, 1999; Murray et al.; 1990), pro-social behavior ( Helliwell, 2003; Helliwell & Putnam, 2005), and good physical health (Huppert & Whittington, 2003). Existing literature suggests that women may face unique challenges that can impact their psychological well-being, such as the pressures of work-life balance, gender-based discrimination, and societal expectations (Phillips & Grandy, 2018).

### **Resilience**

Resilience plays a vital role in everyone's life, enabling individuals to adapt effectively to the ever-changing circumstances and challenges of the environment. It acts as a cornerstone for personal growth, allowing people to navigate uncertainties, recover from setbacks, and maintain emotional and

psychological stability. According to Wagnild (2009), at some point in life, everyone faces setbacks and challenges, but the capacity to recover and persevere varies from person to person. This ability to recover and move forward is called resilience.

Originating from the Latin word "resilire," the term "Resilience" signifies bouncing back, with "re" representing a backward movement and "salire" meaning to bounce back or leap up (Ebersöhn, 2014). The concept of resilience first emerged in science and mathematics, describing the capacity of a stressed material to recover. In psychology, resilience is the ability to cope well with adversity, fostering well-being and improving quality of life. The core of resilience lies in the ability to overcome adversity.

Early studies by Garmezy (1971), Rutter (1979) and Werner (1989) focused on the resilience of children. The concept has since expanded to include adults' ability to cope with exceptional circumstances, from wartime experiences and disasters to more common yet significant events such as serious traffic accidents. Resilient people can successfully adjust to life's changes, challenges, and setbacks (Joseph, 1994). Chan and Mak (2021) found a strong effect of resilience among gender minorities. The resilience levels may act as buffer to lessen the detrimental effects for gender-related discrimination as mentioned by Zhang et al. (2021). Resilient athletes demonstrate a remarkable ability to withstand stress, making them less susceptible to experiencing burnout (McManama et al., 2021). A study revealed that resilience was positively correlated with sport achievement and psychological well-being, and negatively correlated with psychological distress (Nezhad & Besharat, 2010). The studies of Ong et al. (2009) and Tugade & Fredrickson (2004) demonstrate that trait resilience fosters positive emotions, thereby producing

advantageous outcomes during stressful periods.

### **Purpose of the study**

Sexism, whether overt or subtle, remains a pervasive societal issue that continues to undermine women's psychological well-being and life satisfaction. It manifests in various forms, from blatant discrimination to insidious micro-aggressions, cumulatively creating environments that hinder personal growth and mental health. The psychological distress caused by sexism not only affects women's emotional and mental states but also limits their ability to achieve their full potential across personal, professional, and social domains. Resolution of this issue is essential not only for individual well-being but also for fostering equitable and prosperous communities.

This study aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being, which underscores the importance of promoting mental health and ensuring access to mental health care. By highlighting the detrimental impact of sexism on psychological health, the research underscores the need for systemic interventions and individual strategies to mitigate these effects. Furthermore, the study contributes to SDG 5: Gender Equality, which supports the removal of all types of bias and unfair treatment against women of all age.

This study seeks to understand how sexism affects psychological wellbeing and resilience of women. By examining these construct, the research aims to highlight how women can harness their strengths to mitigate the adverse effects of sexism. Fostering psychological well-being and resilience in women is crucial for their empowerment and ability to navigate challenges like discrimination and inequality. Resilient women can recover from adversity, make informed decisions, and contribute

positively to families and communities. Prioritizing their well-being not only supports individual growth but also fosters stronger families, equitable workplaces, and healthier societies. The findings of this study are intended to inform interventions and policies that promote psychological well-being, empowerment, and gender equality, thereby contributing to efforts to reduce the harmful impacts of sexism in society. According to the purpose of the study, the research questions are as follows: (1 Do sexist experiences predict psychological wellbeing? (2 Do sexist experiences predict resilience?

Based on the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

### **Hypotheses**

- H1: There will be negative relationship between sexism and psychological wellbeing and its dimensions (self-actualization, autonomy, personal relationship, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life).
- H2: There will be negative relationship between sexism and resilience.
- H3: Sexism will negatively predict psychological wellbeing and its dimensions.
- H4: Sexism will negatively predict resilience.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The study sample consisted of 100 women aged between 20 and 35 years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling.

#### **Instruments**

*Schedule of Sexist Events (SSE)* by Klonoff & Landrine, (1995): This study used a modified version of the Schedule of Sexist Events (SSE). For convenience, questions on "schedule of sexist events - recent" were removed, only asking questions about

“schedule of sexist events- lifetime.” The question from the original scale asking, “how different would your life have been now if you had not been treated in a sexist or unfair way?” was also removed for convenience. The modified scale consists of 19 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 signifies “never happened” and 6 signifies “happened almost all of the time”. The SSE-Lifetime demonstrated high internal consistency reliability (.92) and split-half reliability (.87). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha for the SSE-L was .88

*Psychological well-being scale* by Ryff & Keyes (1995): It is a shortened version of original 42 item scale. This shortened scale consists of 18 items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). It assesses six dimensions of well-being: self-actualization, autonomy, positive relationships, personal growth, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. The scale demonstrates strong reliability, with an overall internal consistency of .82 and subscale reliabilities ranging from .71 to .78.

*Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-2)* by Vaishnavi, Connor, and Davidson (2007): It is two-item abbreviated version of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), which was designed to assess resilience. Higher scores on the scale indicate greater levels of resilience. Each item is

rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from “Not true at all” to “True nearly all of the time.”

### Procedure

The participants in the study were approached directly. Rapport was established to ensure their comfort, and they were debriefed on the purpose of the entire study. Questionnaires were administered with standard instructions written on them. They were graciously appreciated for their cooperation. The scoring of all the tools was done following their individual manual instructions.

### Results

Table 1: Showing descriptive statistics of Sexism, Psychological wellbeing and Resilience.

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std.Deviation
Sexism	100	28	89	54.47	11.584
PWB	100	62	115	90.33	12.410
Resilience	100	2	10	7.69	1.926

The descriptive statistics for the variables in the study are summarized in Table 1. It can be observed that mean score of sexism was 54.47 with a standard deviation of 11.584. In addition to this psychological wellbeing had a mean of 90.33 and standard deviation of 12.410. The mean score and standard deviation of resilience was 7.69 and 1.926 respectively.

Table 2: Depicting the Relationship between Sexism, Psychological Wellbeing, its subscales and resilience.

	A	SA	EM	PL	PG	PR	PWB	Resilience
Sexism	-0.188	-0.440**	-0.281**	-0.321**	-0.411**	-0.233**	-0.499**	-0.387**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

PWB = Psychological wellbeing, A = Autonomy, SA = Self Acceptance, EM = Environmental Mastery, PL= Purpose in Life, PG = Personal Growth, PR = Positive Relation with Others

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients between sexism, various dimensions of psychological wellbeing (PWB) and resilience. Sexism shows a significant negative correlation with Self-acceptance (PWB-SA)  $r = -0.440$  at .01 level of

significance, Environmental mastery (PWB-EM)  $r = -0.281$  at .01 level of significance, Purpose in Life (PWB-PL)  $r = -0.321$  at .01 level of significance, Personal growth (PWB-PG)  $r = -0.411$  at .01 level of significance, Positive relation with others (PWB-PR)  $r = -0.233$  at .01 level of significance, and overall psychological wellbeing PWB  $r = -0.499$ , at .01 level of significance. The correlation with Autonomy (PWB-A)  $r = -0.188$  is negative but does not reach statistical significance. These results suggest that higher levels of sexism are associated with lower levels of

psychological wellbeing across most dimensions. Therefore H1 stating that there will be negative relationship between sexism and psychological wellbeing and its dimension is accepted.

In Addition to this, a significant negative correlation was found between sexism and resilience ( $r = -0.387$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, H2 stating that there will be negative relationship between sexism and resilience is accepted.

Table 3: Showing the results of regression analysis considering sexism as predictor of psychological wellbeing.

Predictor	Multiple R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	B	F	P
Sexism	.499	.249	.241	-.499	32.415	.000

Table 3 shows experiences of sexism to be significantly and negatively correlated with psychological wellbeing. The square of multiple correlations (R<sup>2</sup>) showed that 24.9% of the variance in psychological wellbeing was explained by sexism. By considering the F value of sexism (F= 32.415,  $p < .01$ ) it can be concluded that sexism contributed

significantly and negatively in predicting psychological wellbeing. The B value of sexism (B= -.499) suggested that it had a significant negative impact on psychological wellbeing. Thus, H3 stating that sexism will negatively predict psychological wellbeing is accepted.

Table 4: Showing the result of regression analysis considering sexism as predictor of the dimension of psychological wellbeing (Autonomy, Self Acceptance, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, Personal Growth, and Positive Relation with Others).

Predictor	Multiple R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	B	F	P
Sexism	.418	.175	.166	-.418	20.737	.000

From table 4, it can be seen that sexism emerged as the most potent predictor of personal growth (PG) among the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing. The square of multiple correlations (R<sup>2</sup>) showed that 17.5% of the variance in personal growth dimension of psychological wellbeing was

explained by sexism. By considering the F value of sexism (F= 20.737,  $p < 0.01$ ) it can be concluded that sexism contributed significantly and negatively in predicting personal growth. Thus H3 stating that sexism will negatively predict dimensions of psychological wellbeing is accepted.

Table 5: Showing the results of regression analysis considering sexism as predictor of resilience.

Predictor	Multiple R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	B	F	P
Sexism	.371	.138	.129	-.371	15.646	.000

Table 5 shows sexism to be significantly and negatively correlated with resilience. The square of multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ) showed that 13.8% of the variance in resilience was explained by sexism. By considering the F value of sexism ( $F = 15.646, p < .01$ ) it can be concluded that sexism contributed significantly and negatively in predicting resilience. The  $\beta$  value of sexism ( $\beta = -.371$ ) suggested that it had a significant and negative impact on resilience. Thus, H4 stating that sexism will predict resilience is accepted.

### Discussion

The findings from the current study highlight the pervasive and detrimental impact of sexism on psychological wellbeing and its dimensions, as well as on resilience. Existing literature indicates the persistence of sexism, with the overall gender equality index revealing a score of 68.5 out of 100 for women. According to the report, achieving full gender parity would take at least 134 years, or until 2158, extending five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) deadline (World Economic Forum, 2024). The results provide robust evidence supporting the hypotheses that sexism negatively correlates with psychological wellbeing, its dimensions, and resilience, explaining that as an individual is exposed to more incidents of sexism, the more their psychological wellbeing and resilience will deteriorate.

A negative correlation between the level of sexism and psychological well-being was hypothesized (H1). Linear regression analysis indicated a statistically significant negative relationship between sexism (independent variable) and psychological well-being (dependent variable). The current research indicates that sexist experiences may compromise psychological well-being. These findings align with prior research indicating a correlation between cumulative

and recent sexism and poorer psychological well-being, including increased depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Landry & Mercurio, 2009). Szymanski et al. (2009) suggested in their research that identifying oneself as a victim of sexism can negatively impact psychological well-being. Another research by Klonoff et al. (2000) highlighted that experiences of sexism not only adversely affect women's overall psychological well-being but may also contribute indirectly to their higher levels of psychological distress compared to men. This is especially evident among women who report encountering sexism more frequently. Two studies conducted by Oswald et al. (2019), found that the Schedule of Sexist Events was associated with decreased self-esteem, and poorer psychological well-being and flourishing. According to Ryff et al. (2003) perceived discrimination was consistently emerged as a negative predictor of psychological well-being. Moreover, among the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing (Autonomy, Self Acceptance, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, Personal Growth, and Positive Relation with Others ) personal growth is most affected by the experiences of sexism.

The hypothesis (H2) proposed that higher levels of sexism are associated with lower level of resilience. Results from a simple linear regression demonstrated a significant negative association between sexism (PV) and resilience (CV). The findings suggest that sexist experiences have a detrimental impact on an individual's resilience, significantly weakening their ability to recover from challenges and adapt to adversity. These experiences not only undermine psychological resources but also impair coping mechanisms, leaving individuals more vulnerable to stress and its negative consequences. This highlights the profound and far-reaching effects of sexism on mental health and overall well-being. In line with prior

research, including the work of Goyal et al., (2021); Lehavot et al., (2019); McGee & Bentley, (2017), these findings demonstrate a consistent link between exposure to sexist experiences and a measurable decrease in an individual's overall resilience and capacity to successfully manage challenging situations. Zhang et al. (2021) found that gender-related discrimination significantly impacts and influences an individual's resilience.

Overall, the research adds to the body of knowledge on sexism and its effects on psychological wellbeing and resilience in women (Szymanski et al., 2011; McGee & Bentley, 2017; Lehavot et al., 2019). By exploring the intricate relationship between sexism, psychological well-being, and resilience, this research enhances our understanding of the challenges women face in patriarchal societies. Sexism is not something that only existed in the past; it continues to significantly affect women's lives today. So, these findings collectively emphasize the critical role that societal factors, like sexism, play in shaping psychological outcomes, highlighting the need for continued efforts to combat sexism. Additionally, its detrimental impact on resilience highlights how discrimination not only affects current wellbeing but also compromises the ability to adapt to future challenges.

These results have important implications for both research and intervention. They underscore the need for policies and programs aimed at mitigating sexism and fostering environments that promote equality and inclusion. Additionally, therapeutic interventions should address the psychological damage caused by sexism, focusing on enhancing resilience and promoting personal growth as protective factors. Future research should explore potential moderating variables, such as self-efficacy or social support, to identify pathways

for mitigating the adverse effects of sexism on psychological health. By addressing these gaps, a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between societal discrimination and mental health can be achieved.

### **Conclusion**

Researchers have identified a range of protective factors that contribute to resilience, including individual characteristics, family dynamics, community support, and societal structures. (Jongen et al., 2020) By understanding and nurturing these factors, we can empower women to navigate the challenges they face and emerge stronger. The research underscores the necessity of eradicating sexist structures and discouraging sexist stereotypes, roles, biases, attitudes, and behaviors; moreover, it emphasizes the importance of developing preventative measures and interventions to enhance women's resilience, and psychological well-being. Continued investigation is required to fully comprehend the diverse effects of sexism on women and to explore strategies for its reduction.

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**Samra Lodi**, PhD Scholar, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

**Nasheed Imtiaz**, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh