

**50** YEARS  
WOMEN | MBA

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• Research Symposium

# GENDER & WORK:

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

# BACKLASH AND THE DOUBLE BIND

GENDER  
& WORK

## BS AT WORK:

### How Benevolent Sexism Undermines Women and Justifies Backlash

Peter Glick

Lawrence University

What motivates sex discrimination? Rounding up the usual suspects, negative stereotypes and hostility toward women would top the list. Challenging the conventional view, this paper focuses on subjectively favorable (but patronizing) attitudes toward women, labeled “benevolent sexism” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Benevolent sexism harms women in multiple ways by: (a) justifying and reinforcing hostile sexism, (b) fostering often unrecognized discrimination that limits women’s opportunities and diminishes their performance, (c) eliciting backlash when resisted, and (d) sapping women’s personal ambitions and resistance to inequality.

#### The Central Gender Relationship Paradox

In intergroup relations, power differences typically generate hostility and discrimination, creating social distance through exclusion, avoidance, and segregation. Both social scientific and popular conceptions of prejudice assume this pattern. For example, social distance measures (Bogardus, 1947) presumed that a person who tolerated highly intimate contact (e.g., close friendship, marriage) with outgroup members was completely non-prejudiced and undoubtedly willing to engage in any and all less intimate forms of contact (e.g., being coworkers). While one can easily imagine a bigot’s growing discomfort for increasingly intimate contact with outgroup members, gender relations differ. Historically, men have actively desired the most intimate contact with women while excluding them in a less intimate setting, the workplace.

Sexism’s uniqueness reflects what I will call the *central gender relationship paradox*: male dominance coexists with intimate interdependence on women. Men may rule, but heterosexual men have always depended on women for love, sex, and domestic labor. As former Harvard professor Henry Kissinger put it, “Nobody will ever win the battle of the sexes. There’s too much fraternizing with the enemy.” Thus, a sexist man who bristles at working with women sees no contradiction in having his most intimate relationship cross gender lines (and would probably take offense if asked whether he would consider marrying *within* his gender group).

If prejudice functions to maintain dominant groups’ power, sexist ideology must do so while allowing for, even encouraging, heterosexual intimacy. Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001) suggests that complementary hostile and benevolently sexist beliefs developed precisely to accomplish this task. In a nutshell, Susan Fiske and I proposed that although male dominance creates hostile sexist attitudes that demean women, intimate interdependence generates benevolent sexism (or BS): subjectively positive attitudes that simultaneously idealize but subordinate women as men’s dependents.

Although they have different valences toward women, hostile and benevolent sexism do not psychologically conflict; rather, they jointly resolve the tension between dominance and interdependence. Hostile sexism punishes women when they challenge male dominance, while BS

rewards women for conforming to stereotypes and roles that serve men’s needs. Together, these ideologies act as the carrot and the stick that motivate women to stay “in their place.”

More specifically, hostile sexism scale items rebuke women viewed as upsetting the traditional balance of power, whether through feminism (e.g., “Feminists are making unreasonable demands of men”), “unfair” competition (e.g., “Women exaggerate problems they have at work”), or sexual manipulation (e.g., “Many women get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances”). BS items idealize women as wonderful (e.g., “Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess”), to be cherished (e.g., “A good woman ought to be set on a pedestal by her man”), but as dependent on male providers (e.g., “Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives”).

Although BS promises women a pedestal, not all women qualify for this elevated place. Only those who embrace acceptable roles or embody feminine stereotypes make the grade, and only for so long as they continue to do so. The pedestal image is apt: it describes a narrow, confining space that is easy to fall from.

#### BS Complements and Justifies Hostile Sexism

Benevolently sexist attitudes do not reflect post-feminist political correctness; rather, they are firmly rooted in traditional gender stereotypes. BS’s traditionality and complementarity with hostile sexism are evidenced by a positive correlation between them. Benevolent sexists, more often than not, are also hostile sexists. At the individual level, hostile and benevolent sexism correlate modestly (about .4); more striking is the almost perfect correlation (close to .9) that occurs when comparing sample averages across nations (Glick et al., 2000, 2004). In other words, the nations in which people strongly endorse BS are those where people most strongly endorse hostile sexism – the two go hand in hand. Further, national averages on both scales predict fewer women in high-level government and business roles (Glick et al., 2000, 2004). In short, high BS nations exhibit more hostile sexism and less equality for women, suggesting that whatever protection BS ostensibly offers, women fare less well in societies that strongly endorse BS.

Ideologically, BS plays a critical role in justifying hostile sexism and inequality. For men, BS justifies their traditional power and privilege while characterizing their gender group as heroic protectors and family providers, rather than callous oppressors. Accuse a man of sexism and he might defend himself by citing his happy marriage, his love for his mother, sisters, and daughter (it’s only feminists and power-seeking career women he dislikes). For women, BS seduces with promises: men will protect and provide, adore and cherish you – your pedestal awaits. Thus, unlike hostile sexism, women often endorse BS as much or even more than men (Glick et al., 2000, 2004). And just as BS helps men to justify hostile sexism, BS increases women’s willingness to endorse hostile sexism. In longitudinal studies, Sibley, Overall, and Duckitt (2007) found that women’s BS scores predict subsequent increases in hostile sexism. Women who accept BS come to resent women who, by seeking equality, threaten traditional gender relations in which women cede power in exchange for men’s provision and protection.

#### Patronizing Discrimination in Organizations

It would be wrong to assume that BS only harms women through its relationship to hostile sexism. Benevolent, rather than hostile sexism uniquely predicts patronizing discrimination, which masquerades as polite help and sympathy while undermining women. Consider findings by King et al. (2012). They surveyed energy industry managers about the evaluative feedback received in their careers. Women reported receiving less criticism than their male counterparts. What could

be wrong with that? Far from being slammed with hostility, even in a highly masculine industry women garnered more favorable comments than men.

But these women also reported receiving less challenging developmental assignments than men did. King et al. replicated this finding in a second study with thousands of managers in England's National Health Service (though feedback quality was not assessed). The combination of positive feedback with less challenging assignments suggests that, rather than being favored, managers patronized women by treating them with kid gloves.

In subsequent studies, King et al. had college undergrads and MBA students role-play assigning tasks to, depending on random assignment, an identically-described male or female subordinate. Men who scored high in BS assigned less challenging opportunities to female (but not male) subordinates. Low BS men did not show this effect, nor did women, regardless of their BS scores. In other words, when high BS men are in charge, they “go easy” on women. Imagine how effectively such subtle discrimination undermines women's ability both to develop and to demonstrate work-relevant skills; completing easy tasks does not put an employee on the fast track. Benevolently sexist male managers deny women opportunities to hone and show their skills, undercutting their potential to achieve impressive successes.

Similarly, Biernat, Tocci, and Williams (2012) found that female, as compared to male, associates at a Wall Street law firm received more positive narrative comments in their formal evaluations (coding for words such as excellent, terrific, stellar). But on the numerical ratings the firm relied on for promotion decisions, the gender difference was reversed. Also, within the narrative comments, over 14% of male associates were mentioned as potential “partner material” compared to only 6% of female associates. Together, these findings suggest that the superlatives female associates received reflected a lower, benevolently sexist standard for women.

### Patronizing Discrimination Undermines Women's Performance

Vescio and her colleagues (2005) had anticipated such real-world findings in lab experiments showing that, when given power, men tend to praise female subordinates while denying them tangible rewards. Importantly, Vescio et al. also demonstrated that such patronizing treatment diminishes women's task performance. Similarly, Dardenne, Dumont, and Bollier (2007) have shown that expecting benevolently sexist attitudes in male-dominated workplaces diminishes women's performance. Across four studies, some with adult job-seekers and others with undergraduates, women participated in a job selection simulation. A man described as a recruiter for an industrial firm administered a logic-puzzle test characterized as a standard selection test for many jobs. Beforehand, the recruiter described the attitudes he and male co-workers shared toward potential female employees, which (depending on condition) were modeled on either the benevolent or hostile sexism scale. Women exposed to benevolently sexist comments performed less well on the selection test than those exposed to hostile sexist or (in a control condition) no sexist comments. Subsequent studies showed that this performance decrement occurred due to intrusive self-doubts.

In short, converging evidence suggests that benevolently sexist discrimination sabotages women from the outside -- shunting them to a slower track by limiting opportunities -- and from the inside -- by sowing self-doubt. By contrast, recall that exposure to hostile sexism did not decrease women's performance. Why? Experiencing hostile sexism can motivate resistance and a desire to prove oneself. By contrast, because BS comes in apparently benign guises -- as kindness, help, or praise -- women (as well as men) tend not to classify such acts as “discriminatory.” When Dardenne et al. asked whether the job recruiter had seemed sexist, women viewed the benevolently sexist recruiter as nonsexist, no different than in the control condition. More generally, Baretto and Ellemers (2005) have shown that men who express benevolently sexist attitudes are typically liked and not viewed as sexist, especially in comparison to men who express hostile sex-

ism. Wrapped in a veneer of kindly concern, BS evades people's prejudice radar, while seriously damaging women's prospects for success.

### Declining Patronizing Offers Elicits Backlash

Even if recognized as sexist, patronizing discrimination puts women in a bind. Consider a woman's choices when faced with a benevolently sexist offer of help at work. Meekly accepting may signal that she lacks competence to do the task herself. Politely refusing suggests competence, but at what cost? Colleagues and I (Becker, Glick, Ilic, & Bohner, 2011) examined this scenario. Participants viewed pictures and text depicting a woman at a computer. Her male coworker offered help in an explicitly patronizing, sexist manner, saying that “setting up the network server is too difficult and frustrating for a woman.” She either accepted his help or politely turned it down; in a control condition, the scenario ended before she responded.

If the woman accepted help, observers perceived her as less competent than if her response was not known or she declined the offer. By declining, however, she sacrificed perceived warmth. The competence effect was not sexist -- when we reversed the situation and a woman offered patronizing help to a man, accepting help equally diminished a man's perceived competence. But the warmth penalty uniquely applied to women. In short, men face no dilemma: refusing help maintains their perceived competence and imposes no cost. By contrast, women face a bind, even when the help offer explicitly patronizes: accepting help sacrifices perceived competence, but declining it sacrifices perceived warmth. These results parallel Laurie Rudman's work on backlash toward women who act in masculine ways; while perceived as competent, they are viewed as cold and penalized in job decisions (e.g., Rudman & Glick, 1999).

### BS Saps Women's Career Ambitions

For women, the combined carrot and stick of hostile and benevolent sexism create a powerful push and pull toward embracing more feminine roles. Why travel the hard road and face hostility for failing to conform to feminine norms when, if you toe the line, a man will provide? And if a woman expects a knight in shining armor to come along, why invest heavily in a career? Rudman and Heppen (2003) found that female undergraduates who implicitly associated male romantic partners with chivalrous “protector and provider” images (e.g., “knights” and “princes”) had lower career ambitions. BS items make such beliefs explicit. Recent research shows endorsing BS negatively predicts high school girls' academic aspirations and, in turn, their academic performance (Montañés, et al., 2012), setting girls on a path where a male provider becomes ever more attractive. Similarly, Linda Peach and I (2013) found that college-aged women who endorse BS show less ambition to achieve financial independence.

Thus, endorsing BS seems to sap women's career ambitions, replacing them with the ambition to snare a good provider. Across nine nations, Eastwick and colleagues (2006) found that the more women endorse BS, the more they emphasize a man's financial success in choosing a mate (see also Lee, Fiske, Glick, & Chen, 2010). Further, women who endorse BS tend to believe that career success may interfere with their romantic attractiveness to men. Specifically, colleagues and I (Expósito, Herrera, Moya, & Glick, 2010) found that high BS women believed that a husband would be threatened by a wife whose career success exceeded his own, further diminishing their incentive to invest heavily in a career.

### BS Reduces Women's Resistance to Inequality

Endorsing BS not only saps women's career ambitions, it also reduces their resistance to inequality. Specifically, women's BS scores correlate with believing that current gender inequalities are



legitimate and fair, the result of women’s own choices and not discrimination (Becker & Wright, 2011; Glick & Whitehead, 2010). Even more insidiously, women do not have to actively endorse BS for it to increase their perceptions of society’s fairness and undermine collective efforts for change. Mere exposure to items on the BS scale – just being reminded that these cultural beliefs exist – leads women to view society as fairer (Jost & Kay, 2005) and lessens their interest in actions that promote women’s rights, such as signing a petition or distributing flyers (Becker & Wright, 2011). Simply by being part of the cultural milieu, BS reduces women’s willingness to view the status quo as unfair or to seek social change.

### Conclusion and Potential Solutions

For patronizing discrimination, the cliché that the first step requires recognizing the problem rings particularly true. Many people, including women, view benevolently sexist attitudes as desirable, rather than detrimental. It’s worrisome when the typically liberal *Atlantic* publishes an article calling for a return to chivalry (Smith, 2012). In the media, benevolent sexism has been (falsely) parodied as alleging that opening a door for a woman constitutes a heinous oppressive act. More widely disseminating the research described here can help to establish that BS has nontrivial consequences. Raising awareness among women seems particularly important -- if many women sanction BS, men will have little incentive to change.

In addition to raising awareness, research suggests that BS endorsement (especially among women) can be reduced indirectly, by attacking a more acceptable target: hostile sexism. The reciprocal relationship between benevolent and hostile sexism is not confined to the former legitimating the latter. For women, ambivalent sexism functions as a “protection racket” in which hostile sexism provides the threat and BS the solution. Ironically, fearing men’s hostility can drive women straight into men’s arms seeking protection... from other men. In cross-national comparisons (Glick et al., 2000, 2004) we consistently find that women endorse BS significantly more than men only in the most hostile sexist nations. Where men’s hostile sexism is lowest, women reject BS, scoring low overall and significantly lower than men. Experimental evidence confirms that fear of men’s hostile sexism increases women’s attraction to BS. Specifically, Fischer (2006) found that after reading a bogus article about a national survey that revealed rampant male hostile sexism, women showed increased BS. When women face less threat they reject BS. In industrialized nations, economic forces are pushing the trend in the right direction; unfortunately, in some less developed nations, women’s status has remained low.

Despite the downward trend in endorsing sexist attitudes, it will take organizational vigilance to root out and correct patronizing patterns in decision-making. The research covered here suggests detectable patterns that can serve as red flags, but only if organizational awareness increases and spurs deliberate attempts to institutionalize BS-detectors. For example, systematically analyzing evaluations, developmental assignments, and promotion rates can indicate whether female, as compared to male, employees typically receive more praise but less challenging tasks and fewer promotions.

Legal remedies represent a last but important resort. The courts can correct past wrongs and pressure organizations to reform. On first blush, it may seem ludicrous to pursue patronizing discrimination in court: “But your honor, he praised her excessively!” is clearly a nonstarter. Further, judges’ intuitive psychological views (e.g., that discrimination reflects deliberate and hostile intent) may lead to resistance from the bench (Krieger, 2004; Krieger & Fiske, 2006). However, U.S. laws allow two types of proof applicable to patronizing discrimination, suggesting a more optimistic view. Imagine an employer who decides that a high level position would be “too stressful” for a woman; her lawyer could rely on “(1) ‘comparator’ evidence showing that the plaintiff was more qualified than the person who got the promotion [and/or] (2) stereotyping evidence,

based on *Hopkins v Price, Waterhouse*, in which the Supreme Court held that evidence of gender stereotyping can be used to prove that an adverse employment action was taken ‘because of’ sex” (Joan Williams, personal communication. March 7, 2013).

We are still in the early stages of recognizing and documenting benevolent sexism’s insidious effects on maintaining gender inequality. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence suggests that BS represents a significant problem that typically remains undetected while subtly but effectively undermining women. By naming the problem and specifying its dimensions, the research described here represents the critical first steps toward rooting out BS at work.

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## Peter Glick

Professor of Social Sciences  
Lawrence University



Peter Glick is the Henry Merritt Wriston Professor in the Social Sciences at Lawrence University. His research has challenged conventional wisdom by revealing the surprising ways in which subjectively favorable beliefs about women and minorities can fuel and justify harmful discrimination. In collaboration with Susan Fiske (Princeton), he developed ambivalent sexism theory, winning the 1995 Gordon Allport Award for best paper in intergroup relations. Since then, research in over 50 nations has demonstrated that “benevolent sexism” contributes to gender inequality and fosters patronizing discrimination that undermines women at work. The warmth-competence model by Fiske, Amy Cuddy (Harvard), and Glick was recognized as a “breakthrough idea for 2009” by the *Harvard Business Review*. Dr. Glick has been elected a Fellow in six professional psychology societies and President (in 2009) of the *Society for Experimental Social Psychology*. As an expert witness, he has testified in Federal Court in Boston and Chicago. In addition to more than 70 articles and chapters, Dr. Glick has co-edited or co-authored three books, including the *SAGE Handbook of Prejudice* and *The Social Psychology of Gender*.



**HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL**  
**SOLDIERS FIELD**  
**BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02163**  
[WWW.HBS.EDU](http://WWW.HBS.EDU)