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Study Explores How Sexism Within Religious Congregations Shapes Women’s Health

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WASHINGTON, DC—Over the past three decades, numerous studies have shown that religious involvement—indicated by observable feelings, beliefs, activities, and experiences in relation to spiritual, divine, or supernatural entities—tends to favor health and longevity across the life course. However, a new study has found that sexism in religious institutions can limit the health benefits of religious participation for women.

“Although religious participation is generally associated with positive health outcomes, many religious institutions create and reinforce a high degree of structural sexism, defined as systematic gender inequality in power and resources,” say [Patricia Homan](#), assistant professor of sociology, and [Amy Burdette](#), professor of sociology, both at Florida State University. Their study, “When Religion Hurts: Structural Sexism and Health in Religious Congregations,” appears in the April issue of the [American Sociological Review](#).

Their study asks whether attending a sexist religious institution that excludes women from power and leadership is associated with health among women and men. And, if so, how does the health of attendees at inclusive religious institutions and sexist religious institutions compare to individuals who do not regularly participate in organized religion?

“We found that women experience a health benefit from religious participation—relative to non-participants—*only* when they attend religious institutions that are gender inclusive and allow women to hold meaningful leadership roles within the congregation,” says Homan. “Women who attend sexist congregations have the same health as those who do not attend religious services at all, and have worse health than women who attend inclusive churches. These results suggest that the health benefits of religious participation do not extend to groups that are systematically excluded from power and status within their religious institutions.

The study uses a novel dataset created by linking two nationally representative surveys—the General Social Survey and the National Congregations Study—to explore the health consequences of structural sexism within the setting of religious institutions.

“One of the neat things about this project is that we were able to create a novel dataset by linking two nationally representative surveys: the General Social Survey—which gave us all kinds of information about individual respondents like their age, race, gender, marital status, and health,” says Homan. “The National Congregations Study gave us information from the leaders of the religious congregations that the respondents attend, and this allowed us to measure their structural sexism exposure.”

The researchers use three different measures of sexism in order to account for women’s power and status in governance, clergy, and across a range of leadership positions. First, they use a measure indicating whether women are prohibited from serving as full-fledged members of the

congregation's main governing body. Second, they use a measure indicating whether women are prohibited from serving as the head clergyperson or primary religious leader of the congregation. Finally, they created a sexism scale, which is a measure of the number of things that women are prohibited from doing in the congregation: teaching co-ed classes, preaching at a main worship service, serving on the governing body, and being the head clergyperson/leader.

"Our study presents novel evidence regarding the relationship between structural sexism and health," says Homan. "Even in religious congregations, where engagement has well-known health benefits, structural sexism can undermine women's well-being."

For more information and for a copy of the study, contact communications@asanet.org.

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