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Predictors of Differing Experiences with Scriptural Women and Heavenly Mother among Latter-day Saints

Ashley B. LeBaron-Black,* Brigham Young University

Heather H. Kelley,† Brigham Young University

Megan Van Alfen,‡ Brigham Young University

Julie Button,§ Brigham Young University

Sarah M. Coyne, Brigham Young University

Chenaë Christensen-Duerden, Brigham Young University

Although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints avows some empowering doctrines related to gender (including belief in a Heavenly Mother), its members may not be immune to the harmful effects of sexism nor uniform in their gender ideologies. With a mixed methods approach, we explored how Latter-day Saints orient to the belief in female deity, how individual experiences and beliefs about gender are associated with members' religious experiences and behaviors, and whether these links depend on one's gender. Using survey responses from a convenience sample of 1,674 adult Latter-day Saints living in the United States, we tested a structural equation model and two moderation models. We supplemented these analyses with qualitative data analysis of four focus groups ($n=15$) of Latter-day Saints living near Utah County, Utah. On average, Latter-day Saint women who had been the victims of repeated sexism noticed a lack of discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother at church and sought out these topics more frequently in their personal study. Regardless of gender, the more traditional a participant's gender ideology, the more frequently they perceived that scriptural women and Heavenly Mother are discussed at church and the less frequently they reported to have studied them on their own time. Drawing on themes that emerged, we discuss gender inequalities in the Church, intentional efforts to discuss and study scriptural women and Heavenly Mother, and the impact of those stories and doctrines on members' personal and spiritual wellbeing. A celebration of women—including feminine deity—may be a balm for the souls of Latter-day Saints wounded by sexism.

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*Corresponding author: lebaronashley@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4980-2659>.

†ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3778-3689>.

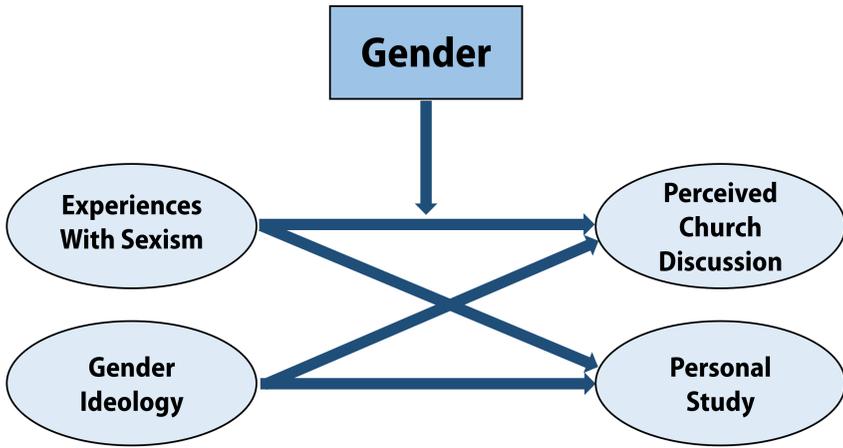
‡ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4177-2819>.

§ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5140-1582>.

Many scholars view the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as The Church of Jesus Christ) as espousing traditional views on gender, similar to the “gender complementarity” noted in many evangelical/conservative Protestant faiths (Ross and Finnigan 2020). At the same time, the Church holds some unique teachings regarding gender, including a belief in a female deity referred to as “Heavenly Mother,” who rules side by side with Heavenly Father, and the belief that women are made in Her divine image (The Church of Jesus Christ 1909). These teachings are buttressed by a scriptural canon containing select but influential stories of faithful women, including priestesses, prophetesses, and heroines who exemplify the important role that women play in scriptural contexts. The belief in female deity and women’s importance in the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a doctrine that may be empowering for some women in the Church.

Of course, these empowering teachings about Heavenly Mother and scriptural women are experienced in the context of many traditional teachings and policies in the Church. The result is that LDS women and men may find themselves navigating a collection of faith-based ideologies, some of which evoke traditional gender roles and others which promote potentially empowering beliefs about women’s spiritual strength and female deity. The intersection of traditional and empowering beliefs may shape how (and how often) Church members think about women—including their doctrine on female deity and scriptural women. Against this backdrop, we were interested in how Latter-day Saints orient themselves to the belief in female deity, which we analyzed using focus group interviews and descriptive statistics. We also wished to know how their gender ideologies and experiences of gender discrimination were associated with those orientations toward female deity. For this, we measured their perceptions about how often scriptural women and Heavenly Mother are discussed at church and their own personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother, then analyzed these findings using structural equation modeling. We further examined whether these associations would be moderated by gender (analyzed using moderation models), as seen in Figure 1 on the following page. Finally, we supplemented these analyses using qualitative data from four focus groups with Latter-day Saints to provide further insight and nuance to our quantitative findings. The findings from this study will advance the field’s understanding of factors that influence personal spiritual study and experiences in the LDS Church.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



Gender in Latter-day Saint Doctrine and Culture

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints holds an arrangement of practices and teachings around gender, which could evoke both “traditional” interpretations (which support and justify gender-differentiated roles and labor) and “egalitarian” interpretations (which emphasize equal participation in the home and workplace by the sexes). Structurally, the denomination’s leadership reserves exclusive authority to priesthood keys and priesthood offices for male priesthood holders. The presiding authorities that oversee all organizations and members are strictly men, with the Church President, First Presidency, and Council of the Twelve Apostles leading the worldwide Church. At the local level, congregations are overseen by men: the stake president, stake presidency, high council, bishop, and bishopric. Leaders across other major Church organizations such as mission presidents, temple presidents, and regional leaders are also strictly men. Women do hold leadership positions within local and general organizations; however, they are primarily over other women, female youth, and children. Because of this leadership structure, some have stated that the Church of Jesus Christ follows a patriarchal order that aligns with traditional ideologies (Petrey 2020; Silva 1994).

Despite this patriarchal organizational structure, Latter-day Saint doctrine avows teachings that frame men and women to have equal status and

potential (The Church of Jesus Christ 2015), which can evoke empowering spiritual narratives. For example, Latter-day Saints believe in a divine Heavenly Mother. The Church acknowledges that “our present knowledge about a Mother in Heaven is limited. Nevertheless, we have been given sufficient knowledge to appreciate the *sacredness* of this doctrine” (paragraph 6). The Church holds that Heavenly Mother is Heavenly Father’s eternal spouse and rules “side by side” with Him (paragraph 3). In this way, Heavenly Father is considered God with a complementary Goddess, and vice versa. Furthermore, Church doctrine holds this as the model for which humans can live in the highest realm of heaven and become like their Heavenly Parents: as a man and woman sealed together in an eternal marriage (D&C 132:19–20). In this way, Latter-day Saint doctrine maintains that “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:11, KJV).

Additional Latter-day Saint teachings about gender can be interpreted as either traditional or empowering, depending on the person. For example, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (1995), a document written by the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church, outlines the ideal attributes of a successful family unit. It highlights the importance of equality and companionship between husband and wife, emphasizing that while each partner has different responsibilities, they are equal in significance and positive effect. The Proclamation also states that mothers are responsible to oversee the nurture of their children and that fathers are to preside over and provide for the family. Whereas the statement about equal partnership could resonate with egalitarian beliefs, the statement about gendered responsibilities aligns with traditional Western norms surrounding division of labor in the home. That is, some church members may perceive these teachings as supporting flexibility in gender role adherence, while others might find justification for male headship and patriarchy. For example, 58% of Latter-day Saint adult members believe that marriage is more satisfying when the man provides for the family and the woman takes care of their home and children, compared to 30% of the general public (Pew Research Center 2012).

Indeed, Latter-day Saint doctrine and culture is embedded with concepts that, in the context of prevailing gender role norms in the United States, can evoke both traditional and empowering ideologies (Hermkens 2011; Paulsen and Pulido 2011). This paradox of ideologies may create considerable heterogeneity in how members of the Church orient themselves to female deity. Specifically, it may particularly affect their own personal study and their per-

ceptions of how often scriptural women and Heavenly Mother are discussed in church settings.

Visibility of Female Deity

Historically, conversations about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother have been infrequent in Latter-day Saint circles. A recent survey of over 5,000 Latter-day Saints suggested that most members (i.e., 70%) report a non-existent or distant relationship with Her (Majeske et al. 2022). Part of this is likely explained by both a relative lack of revealed doctrine about Her compared to Heavenly Father and the instruction from Church leaders to pray only to Heavenly Father (Hinckley 1991; Renlund 2022). Still, the revealed doctrines that Latter-day Saints have about Heavenly Mother (see Paulsen and Pulido 2011) appear to be largely untouched by most members, and a relationship with Her often goes unexplored out of fear that She is too sacred to discuss.

The discussion of scriptural women is also relatively infrequent compared to the discussion of scriptural men. Latter-day Saint scripture contains select inspiring stories of strong, righteous women: three Marys who nurtured, walked with, and knelt at the feet of Christ; Emma Smith, an “elect lady” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:3); God-fearing midwives Puah and Shiphrah of the Book of Exodus; seven prophetesses, such as Deborah and Huldah; and dozens of others. Despite these many women from whom Latter-day Saints can learn and to whom women can look as role models of righteous femininity, it seems rare for scriptural women to be included in talks, lessons, and testimonies at church and at home. For example, some evidence suggests that in talks given at General Conference (a semi-annual conference broadcast for all Church members), only 1.3% of scriptures referenced are about women (Wells 2020). This discrepancy likely derives, in part, from there being fewer stories written about women than about men (Morrill 2017).

Ultimately, because conversations surrounding scriptural women and Heavenly Mother are fewer in comparison to those about scriptural men and Heavenly Father, many individuals may seek scriptural women and Heavenly Mother in their personal lives to compensate for the focus on men. In this study, we are interested in those members who intentionally study scriptural women and Heavenly Mother, as these practices may affect not only their testimony and understanding of divinity but also how they view women’s eternal value and potential (Shurtz 2019).

Gender Ideology and Religious Experience

In examining members' orientations to female deity, we were also interested in how their overall gender-based experiences shaped their perception of and search for greater visibility of female deity, specifically through their engagement with scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. Gender ideology refers to a person's subjectively held beliefs about the differences and relations between men and women, such as those about gender-differentiated labor (e.g., providing vs. caretaking; Davis and Greenstein 2009). Scholars use a person's gender ideology as a key index of overall attitudes and belief systems about gender and gender roles.

These gendered attitudes and belief systems, referred to by some as *gender schema* (Bem 1984; Martin and Halverson 1981), shape the way individuals process information and how they behave in their environments, particularly when gender is perceived as situationally salient. For instance, when a person perceives gender as meaningful to the situation, their gender schemas will activate and subsequently filter the way they interpret events and interactions. As such, a person's gender ideology in their religious settings has the power to shape how they interpret gendered distinctions in their environment. For example, individuals with traditional gender ideologies are more likely to perceive differential treatment of men and women in organizational settings as fair (Forste and Fox 2012; Nordenmark and Nyman 2003). On the other hand, individuals with more progressive or egalitarian ideologies might see the same circumstances as evidence of oppression and inequality.

By extension, we anticipated that members' gender ideologies would likely filter their experiences of gender at church, including their perceptions of how often scriptural women and Heavenly Mother are discussed there. We also expected their perception to affect their own personal attempts to study scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. We anticipated that Latter-day Saints who have traditional gender ideologies would perceive more frequent discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother at church than their counterparts with egalitarian ideologies. These "traditional" members might be less aware of or concerned about how rarely women are discussed in church settings, potentially viewing those disparities as "normal" and justifiable (e.g., "sacred silence" [Paulsen and Pulido 2011]). Therefore, they may perceive there is "sufficient" discourse about women and in turn may be less likely to proactively seek women in their personal religious study. Meanwhile, we anticipated that more egalitarian members—regardless of their gender—would

view differences in how often women are discussed in church settings as meaningful and important, given their beliefs about equal participation and equal visibility. Therefore, we hypothesized that egalitarian members would be more likely than traditional members to perceive the gap in discussion of women in church settings and compensate by seeking out mentions of feminine deity in their personal religious study.

Gender Discrimination and Religious Experience

Gender discrimination, or the negative treatment of a person due to their gender identity, is a common experience, particularly for girls and women (Leaper and Brown 2008), and these experiences may also shape how Latter-day Saints interact with doctrine about female deity. Negative experiences for women and girls can include stereotypes, prejudice, sexual harassment, or other forms of sexism (Brown 2017). In this study, we focused particularly on women's and men's experiences of being a direct target of negative treatment because of their gender. Scientific research on gender discrimination has focused mainly on girls and women because of the greater frequency of gender discrimination for women compared to men. Research has clearly shown that experiencing gender discrimination is a distressing event that can diminish self-esteem (Brown et al. 2010), undermine social and institutional belonging (Andrews et al. 2018; Rogers et al. 2021), and increase psychological distress (Rogers et al. 2022), including anxiety and depression (Foster 2000; Landrine et al. 1995; Swim et al. 2001).

Because of adverse side effects, discrimination demands a phenomenological process in which victims attempt to cope with and interpret the experience and its implications for their social identity (Spencer et al. 1997). People evaluate and respond to experiences of sexism in variable ways, again with most studies focusing on girls and women. For some girls and women, discrimination can raise the perceptual salience of gender, capitalizing on and reinforcing prevailing gender norms (Martin and Halverson 1981; Rogers et al. 2021). Consequently, it can heighten their internalized stereotypes about their gender group (Rogers et al. 2021) and even diminish their sense of pride in their gender identity (Hewlett et al. 2008; Rogers et al. 2022). Alternatively, some girls and women may experience strengthened identification with their gender group and seek more solidarity with other girls and women to the degree that they engage in active coping responses, such as seeking social support from others (Kaiser and Miller 2004).

There is considerable research on how women experience discrimination within religious contexts, and how gender and religion intersect in complex ways to shape experiences, worldviews, and ideologies of men and women (Avishai et al. 2015). This means that women's experiences with discrimination will constitute their faith experiences, and vice versa, and that religious understandings are a relevant filter through which they make meaning of their experiences of discrimination (Burke 2012). For Latter-day Saints, experiencing gender discrimination could reinforce prevailing gender norms common to many conservative Christian traditions that profess that men and women have innately different desires and capabilities that naturally delineate gendered responsibilities within the religious organization (Homan and Burdette 2021; Perry 2019). In such a context, experiencing discrimination might strengthen beliefs in a traditional division of men's and women's roles (Burn and Busso 2005; Taşdemir and Sakallı-Uğurlu 2010), lessening one's orientation toward seeking female deity and/or increasing the likelihood of perceiving "enough" of these discussions in church settings. Other members might actually be more inclined to seek female deity in response to discrimination in that doing so represents a meaningful coping mechanism. That is, reading about the experiences of scriptural women and seeking connection with Heavenly Mother may help some women to better understand their own identities.

Ultimately, the association between experiencing discrimination and orienting to feminine deity is likely dependent on one's gender. Discrimination does not happen in a vacuum, but within social systems that devalue feminine-typed qualities while elevating masculine-typed ones. This means that discrimination in patriarchal contexts poses a greater threat to women than to men, whose elevated status is taken for granted. As a relevant example, although religious participation is generally associated with positive health outcomes (Krause 2002; Schieman et al. 2006), that may only be true for those who are not systematically excluded from power and status within their religious organizations (Etengoff and Lefevor 2021). Women experiencing structural sexism within religion often have lower mental and physical health due to this stressful source of internal conflict (Etengoff and Lefevor 2021; Homan and Burdette 2021).

This phenomenon may be especially true for individuals who regularly participate in church activities (Homan and Burdette 2021), such as Latter-day Saints, who have generally high expectations of involvement: attending multiple meetings a week, holding a service position (i.e., a "calling"), wearing their

temple garments daily, and studying the scriptures and attending the temple in their personal time. This involvement creates an added level of salience of religion in members' lives that could render connection with female deity a more substantial coping opportunity.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Given previous literature, we formed the following research question and hypotheses:

RQ1. How do Latter-day Saints orient to female deity?

H1a. Experiences with sexism will be negatively associated with the perceived amount of discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother at church.

H1b. This negative association will be significant for women but not for men.

H2a. Experiences with sexism will be positively associated with the amount of personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother.

H2b. This positive association will be significant for women but not for men.

H3a. Traditional gender ideology will be positively associated with the amount of perceived discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother at church.

H3b. This positive association will not be moderated by gender.

H4a. Traditional gender ideology will be negatively associated with amount of personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother.

H4b. This negative association will not be moderated by gender.

Method: Survey

Participants and Procedure

Data were from the *Divinity of Women Project*. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received prior to data collection, and all participants consented to participation. The survey was conducted using Qualtrics Panel from March to May 2022. Using an IRB-approved script, we advertised the study in various Latter-day Saint social media groups, and participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The script included the following description: "The

survey will include questions related to experiences with religion and God, women in the scriptures, Heavenly Mother, personal scripture study, self-esteem, and ideas about gender.” The sample was therefore not random or representative, but a self-selected convenience sample. All study participants were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 18 years or older, and residing in the United States. The original sample size was 2,935, but the following records were dropped from the sample during data cleaning: 222 for completing the survey in less than 300 seconds, 131 for failing the first attention check question, 320 for failing the second attention check question, four for reporting more daughters than children, and 584 for suspicious email addresses (as determined by two researchers). Thus, the final sample is 1,674 Latter-day Saints. The first 250 (of 1,422) women who completed the survey and the total 221 men who completed the survey were emailed \$10 Amazon gift cards.

Participant age ranged from 18 to 77, with a mean of 36.12 ($SD=9.80$). Most participants (1,422; 84.9%) were women, with 221 (13.2%) men, 26 (1.6%) who identified as another gender (i.e., agender, gender queer or gender fluid or nonbinary, questioning or unsure, trans woman, or other), and five (.3%) who preferred not to answer. Almost all participants (1,592; 95.1%) were White, with other participants being Hispanic or Latinx (63; 3.8%), Black or African American (23; 1.4%), Asian (18; 1.1%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (15; .9%), or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (10; .6%), and the remaining participants reporting “other” (7; .4%) or preferring not to answer (12; .7%). Racial/ethnic responses add up to more than 1,674 because participants could select more than one response category. The majority of the sample was college-educated, with participants having received the following levels of education: less than high school (2; .1%), high school or equivalent (37; 2.2%), some college (271; 16.2%), associate’s degree (115; 6.9%), bachelor’s degree (792; 47.3%), master’s degree (336; 20.1%), and advanced degree (i.e., J.D., M.D., Ph.D., etc.; 117; 7.0%). Two participants (.1%) preferred not to answer. Thus, in terms of education level our sample is considerably more educated compared to LDS members in the United States as a whole (i.e., 74.4% of our sample has a four-year college degree vs. 33% of LDS members in the United States; Pew Research Center 2014). The majority of participants attended religious services once a week or more (1,078; 64.4%), with 296 (17.7%) attending two to three times a month, 93 (5.6%) attending once a month, 129 (7.7%) attending a few times a year, and 77 (4.6%) never attending. Despite this

high attendance rate and all participants reporting they were current members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, fewer than half (722; 43.1%) considered themselves to be “very religious,” with the other participants categorizing themselves as “fairly religious” (536; 32.0%), “somewhat religious” (214; 12.8%), “a little religious” (121; 7.2%), or “not religious at all” (66; 3.9%).

Measures

Independent Variables: Experiences with Sexism and Gender Ideology

Participants indicated how often they had experienced six sexist events in the past year: receiving unwanted or inappropriate romantic attention, being told embarrassing or mean jokes about their gender, being called a nasty or demeaning name related to being a man or woman, being teased about their physical appearance, receiving unwanted physical contact, and being teased or threatened with harm by an other-gender person. Participants were asked to rate the frequency of each occurrence on a 4-point scale: (1=no, never happened; 2=yes, happened once or twice; 3=yes, a few times; 4=yes, several times). This scale was not administered to non-binary individuals because it has been validated only in cisgender populations (Klonoff and Landrine 1995). This scale achieved adequate reliability ($\alpha=.90$).

Participants also reported on their gender ideology with 15 statements from the Family Attitudes Questions in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (see Davis and Greenstein 2009). They responded to items such as “It is much better for everyone concerned if the man is the provider outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family” and “There is some work that is men’s and some that is women’s, and they should not be doing each other’s.” Participants responded on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). After six items were reverse coded, higher scores reflected a more traditional gender ideology. Due to a low α (.52) with the full scale, we dropped seven items with factor loadings below the standard cutoff of .4, and this revised scale with eight items achieved adequate reliability ($\alpha=.84$).

Dependent Variables: Perceived Church Discussion and Personal Study

A two-item scale measuring perceived church discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother was created for the *Divinity of Women Project*. The survey asked participants, “How often do you hear discussion about wom-

en in the scriptures in church settings (e.g., gospel doctrine, Relief Society, sacrament meeting)?” and “How often do you hear discussion about Heavenly Mother in church settings (e.g., gospel doctrine, Relief Society, sacrament meeting)?” Participants responded on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), with higher scores reflecting perception of more frequent church discussion. This scale achieved adequate reliability ($\alpha=.71$).

A three-item scale measuring personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother was also created for the *Divinity of Women Project*. Participants received the following three questions: “How often do you purposefully seek out stories of women in your personal scripture study?” “How often do you personally study the topic of Heavenly Mother?” and “How often do you seek personal connection with Heavenly Mother in some capacity?” Participants responded on the same scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), with higher scores reflecting more frequent personal study. This scale also achieved adequate reliability ($\alpha=.86$).

Moderator: Gender

Gender was recoded to be binary, with 0=man, 1=woman, and nonbinary individuals coded as missing. Although the experiences of nonbinary members of the Church are likely unique and certainly important, this type of gender exploration is beyond the scope of the current study.

Controls: Age, Educational Attainment, and Number of Children

We controlled for the following variables in our analyses: age (continuous from 18 to 77), educational attainment (continuous from “less than high school” to “advanced degree”), and number of children (continuous from 0 to 10+).

Data Analysis Plan

First, we determined descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations in SPSS. Then, we estimated three models in Mplus Version 8.

The first of these was a structural equation model (SEM). Missing data on our study variables ranged from 0 to 2.3%, with most being from nonbinary individuals on experiences with sexism. We handled missing data using full information maximum likelihood (FIML). We used the following as indicators of model fit (Kline 2016): comparative fit index (CFI), root-mean-square

error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). According to Little (2013), $CFI > .95$, $RMSEA < .05$, and $SRMR < .05$ indicate “good” model fit. In Model 1, we tested the direct associations of experiences with sexism and gender ideology (as well as the controls) with perceived church discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother and personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. SEM allowed us to utilize latent variables for all four constructs, reducing measurement error (Schumacker and Lomax 2004). We used the latent variance method so that each latent variable was standardized and its factor loadings could be freely estimated (Beaujean, 2014). The independent variables (and controls) were correlated with each other, and the dependent variables were correlated with each other. We employed seven modification indices (i.e., all correlations between items of the same scale) to improve model fit. The following cutoffs from Cohen (1988) were used to determine effect size of standardized effects: $.1$ =small, $.3$ =medium, and $.5$ =large.

The second and third models were moderation models, where we tested gender as a moderator in all four paths (the two paths from experiences with sexism in Model 2, and the two paths from gender ideology in Model 3). That is, we tested whether the four direct effects differed between men and women. In these models, we used mean scores in place of latent variables; thus, there were no missing data besides educational attainment (.2%) and gender and experiences with sexism, which both had 1.9% missing—the nonbinary individuals and those who preferred not to report their gender in the sample. Missing data were again handled using FIML. In Model 2, we created an interaction term using experiences with sexism and gender. In Model 3, the interaction term was created using gender ideology and gender. In both models, regression paths were estimated from experiences with sexism, gender ideology, gender, and the interaction term (as well as the controls) onto perceived church discussion and personal study. As in the SEM, the independent variables (and controls) were correlated with each other, and the dependent variables were correlated with each other. We then used the model constraint subcommand to test simple slopes of the conditional effects for men and women, and we used loop plots to plot these conditional effects. Simple slopes (and accompanying plots) were tested twice for each of the two moderation models, once for each path; thus, each plot depicts one conditional effect. Finally, we conducted post-hoc Wald tests (for each of the four paths) to determine whether men’s and women’s slopes differed significantly from each other.

Method: Focus Groups

Participants and Procedure

At the conclusion of the quantitative survey, we invited participants who resided in or near Utah County to indicate whether they were interested in attending an in-person focus group conducted in May 2022. In order of survey completion, we invited interested individuals to participate until the focus group slots were full. Specifically, we reached out to potential participants until 20 individuals (10 men and 10 women) agreed to participate in one of four focus groups, two with only men and two with only women. Because four men and one woman did not show up to the focus groups, final participants were six men and nine women (including one trans woman). The following demographics about the focus group participants are based on 16 participants, although one woman (who we afterwards were not able to identify from the others) who is included in the following demographics did not show up to the focus group. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 49. Thirteen participants were married (with two never married and one separated), and 12 were parents. Although all participants considered themselves current members of the Church, they had varying experiences within the Church. Nine considered themselves to be “very religious,” five “fairly religious,” and two “somewhat religious.” Similarly, 10 reported attending church once a week or more, with four participants attending two to three times a month, and two participants attending once a month.

A male researcher conducted the focus groups with men, while three female researchers conducted the focus groups with women. The interviewers used a semi-structured interview approach, with questions focusing on participants’ experiences as a man or woman in the Church of Jesus Christ and their personal efforts and experiences in studying and discussing scriptural women and Heavenly Mother.

Data Analysis Plan

The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using a team-based approach to qualitative data analysis (Levitt et al. 2018; Marks 2015), two researchers reviewed the transcripts and open coded the data independently. After individually identifying prevalent and salient themes, the two researchers came together and discussed what they had each

found, to agree about a codebook. The codebook was created following recommendations from Braun and Clarke (2006) and was agreed upon by the two researchers before being given to two trained coders. The coders used the codebook to independently code the interviews in NVivo 12 software. Two of the four (50%) focus groups (one with women and one with men) were coded independently by both of the coders to calculate interrater reliability. The Kappa coefficient calculated in NVivo 12 was .55, indicating moderate agreement (Landis and Koch 1977). While the researchers identified six overarching themes, we explore only the three that most closely connect to our research questions in the current paper; the remaining themes will be explored in future research. In reporting our findings, we heavily rely on participants' own words as we strive to best represent their experiences (Marks 2015).

In integrating our quantitative and qualitative findings, we employed an explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2005), in which the purpose of the qualitative findings is to provide additional insight and nuance to the quantitative results.

Reflexivity

We note that all authors are active members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While recognizing the benefits of insider perspectives, we also acknowledge the limitations of not having non-member perspectives in our analysis process. Despite all authors belonging to the Church, each has had their own unique journey and experiences with gender and religion. We are acutely aware of how religion can be both a helpful and a harmful influence on individuals and families (Dollahite et al. 2018; Kelley et al. 2020, 2022). We also note that we have worked to be aware of and to limit our personal biases; one way this is executed is through our heavy reliance on participant quotes in our reporting of the qualitative findings.

Quantitative Results

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

For descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations, see Table 1. Many participants in our sample have had repeated experiences with sexism ($M=2.79$ out of 4; $SD=.86$), with women reporting more experiences with sexism. Average gender ideology leaned toward nontraditional ($M=2.19$ out of 5; $SD=.76$), with

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations among Main Study Variables (N = 1,674)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Experiences with Sexism ^a	—				
2. Gender Ideology ^a	-.27***	—			
3. Perceived Church Discussion ^a	-.26***	.45***	—		
4. Personal Study ^a	.32***	-.26***	-.12***	—	
5. Female ^b	.30***	-.19***	-.15***	.26***	—
Mean or Percent	2.79	2.19	2.24	2.92	84.9%
Standard Deviation	.86	.76	.71	1.05	—
Range	1–4	1–5	1–5	1–5	0–1
Mean for Men	2.15	2.55	2.52	2.24	—
Mean for Women	2.89	2.13	2.20	3.03	—
T-value	13.42***	7.34***	6.31***	12.00***	—

Note: ^aMean scores were created for scales. ^bComparison group is male.

*** $p < .001$.

more men than women reporting traditional gender ideology. The average response for perceived church discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother was just more than *rarely* ($M=2.24$ out of 5; $SD=.71$), with men perceiving more frequent discussion. The average response for personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother was just less than *sometimes* ($M=2.92$ out of 5; $SD=1.05$), with women reporting more frequent personal study. All correlations were in the expected directions and were significant at the $p < .001$ level.

SEM (Model 1)

For standardized direct associations from Models 1, 2, and 3, see Table 2. Model 1 fit the data well: CFI=.95; RMSEA=.05 with 90% Confidence Interval [.044, .050]; SRMR=.04. The model explained 36% of the variance in perceived church discussion and 17% of the variance in personal study. Experiences with sexism were negatively associated with perceived church discussion ($\beta=-.18$, $p < .001$; small-medium effect size) and positively associated with personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother ($\beta=.28$, $p < .001$; about medium effect size). Meanwhile, traditional gender ideology was positively associated with perceived church discussion ($\beta=.52$, $p < .001$; large effect size) and

Table 2

Standardized Direct Associations for Structural Equation Models

	Perceived Church Discussion			Personal Study		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Experiences with Sexism	-.18***	.17*	-.14***	.28***	.03	.22***
Gender Ideology	.52***	.39***	.46***	-.23***	-.17***	-.14*
Gender ^a	—	.27***	.04	—	-.05	.21**
Sexism*Gender	—	-.50***	—	—	.33**	—
Ideology*Gender	—	—	-.09	—	—	-.07
Age	.05	.09***	.09**	-.04	-.06*	-.06*
Educational Attainment	.01	-.01	-.01	-.07**	-.05*	-.05
Number of Children	-.10**	-.10***	-.10***	.08**	.07**	.07**

Note: Bolded coefficients indicate significant associations. ^aComparison group is male.

p < .05. **p < .01. *p < .001*

negatively associated with personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$; small-medium effect size). Thus, we found support for H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a.

Moderation Models (Models 2 and 3)

In Model 2, the interaction term (i.e., experiences with sexism * gender) was significantly associated with both perceived church discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother ($\beta = -.50, p < .001$) and personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother ($\beta = .33, p = .003$), providing evidence of moderation in these two paths. For the path from experiences with sexism to perceived church discussion, tests of simple slopes were significant for both men ($b = .14, p = .01$) and women ($b = -.15, p < .001$), indicating that both men’s and women’s slopes were different from zero, (i.e., there was an association between the two variables for both men and women). The one positive slope (men) and one negative slope (women) can be seen in Figure 2; these slopes show that while experiences with sexism for women were associated with perceiving less church discussion, for men, experiences with sexism were associated with perceiving more church discussion. A post-hoc Wald test confirmed that men’s and women’s slopes for this association were indeed significantly different from each other ($p = .02$).

Figure 2: Plot of the Conditional Effect of Experiences with Sexism on Perceived Amount of Church Discussion for Women versus Men

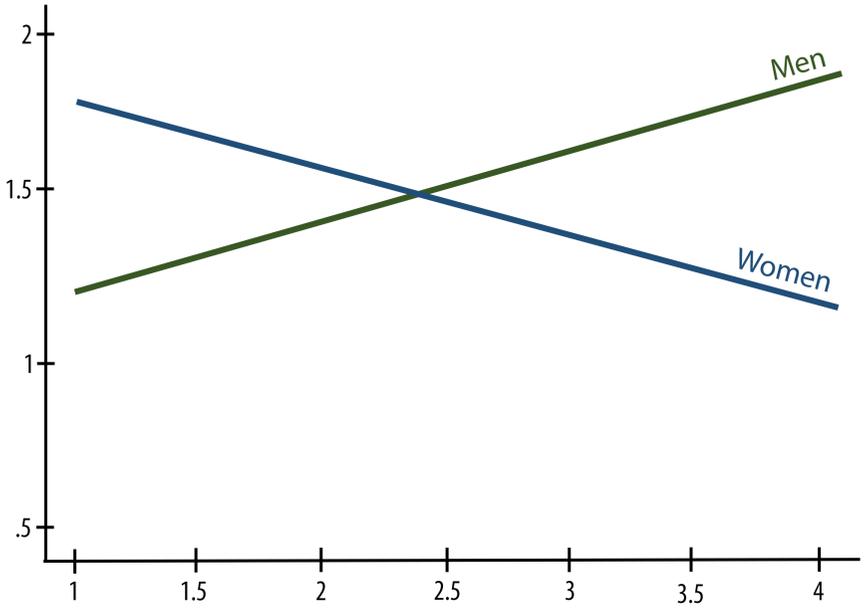
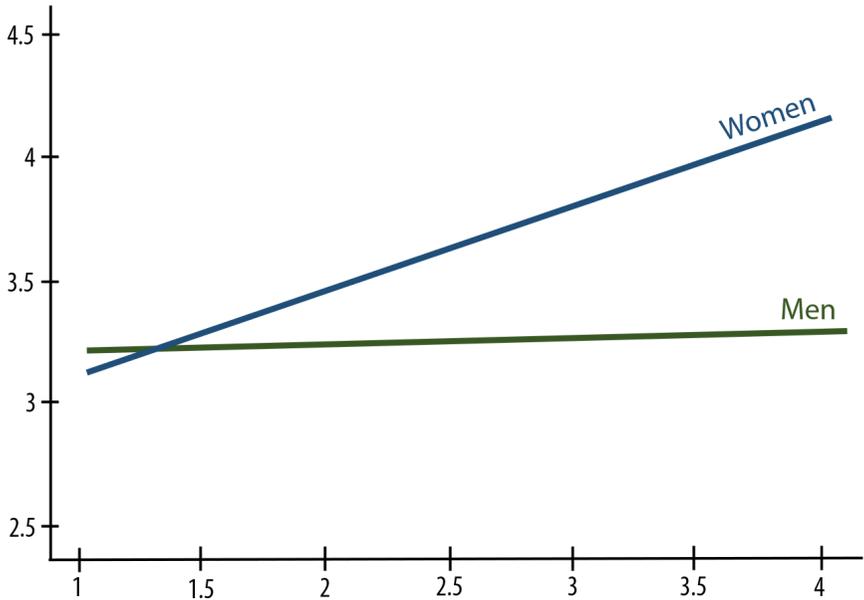


Figure 3: Plot of the Conditional Effect of Experiences with Sexism on Amount of Personal Study for Women versus Men



For the path from experiences with sexism to personal study, tests of simple slopes were significant for women ($b=.31$, $p<.001$) but not for men ($b=.04$, $p=.68$), indicating that there is only an association between these two variables for women. These slopes can be seen in Figure 3 and show that while experiences with sexism were associated with more personal study for women, experiences with sexism were unrelated to personal study for men. However, a post-hoc Wald test indicated that men's and women's slopes for this association were not significantly different from each other ($p=.48$). Taking all the evidence from Model 2 combined, we found support for H1b and H2b. In Model 3, the interaction term (i.e., gender ideology * gender) was not significantly associated with either perceived church discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother ($\beta=-.09$, $p=.30$) or personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother ($\beta=-.07$, $p=.43$), suggesting that gender does not moderate either of these associations. Thus, we found support for H3b and H4b.

Qualitative Findings

Three themes provide additional insights into our research questions: experienced and observed gender inequalities in the Church, intentional efforts in discussing or studying scriptural women and Heavenly Mother, and the impact of hearing women's stories.

Theme 1: Experienced and Observed Gender Inequalities in the Church

Across all the focus groups, participants¹ often struggled to identify the precise source of the gender inequality they were discussing. While participants spoke of specific Church policies or practices that perpetuated gender inequalities, they also often acknowledged that it was impossible to separate the Church's role in creating or exacerbating these inequalities from the role played by our larger society. In response to a question regarding gender inequalities in the Church, one man, Charles, stated, "I don't know that [it] has anything to do with the Church as much as it has to do with the gender norms in North America." A woman similarly contextualized the patriarchal attitudes and gender inequalities of the Church within what she generally saw in society:

¹ Participants in the focus groups are referred to by pseudonym to preserve confidentiality. Women's Group 1: Emma, Charlotte, Amelia, Anna, and Sophia; Women's Group 2: Tessa, Katie, Lauren, and Wendy; Men's Group 1: James, Michael, and Henry; Men's Group 2: Charles, Ben, and Oliver.

Amelia: [A] study was done forever ago about men and women in meetings together, [about] how men felt like women were overpowering the conversation, when in reality, they were only speaking 20% of the time. And it was at the 20% threshold that men then felt like women were speaking equally, and I feel like that's reflected in any patriarchal society, including in the Church, and not that it was done maliciously. But our scriptures were written by men, our Church is led by men, and so women's stories are overlooked so much of the time.

Amelia further differentiated between the *gospel* (i.e., the core doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ) and the *Church* (i.e., the culture, policies, leaders, and members of the Church) when alluding to the inequalities she faced as a woman: “In the gospel, I feel very confident and loved and known and seen. In the Church, I often feel very spoken over and overlooked.” Others emphasized the role of individual differences in exacerbating or mitigating gender inequalities in the Church. James, for example, explained that he had “experienced bishops² who were very autocratic. I think sometimes it's just, what's their background? We had a bishop who was very autocratic, but his background was that he had been a highway patrolman.” Other bishops, he said, had been “on the other end. . . . Our [current] bishop is really good at counsel. . . . He is very reticent.”

While acknowledging individual differences and the role of larger historic inequalities in creating or contributing to the gender inequalities observed in the Church, participants also mentioned a number of LDS-specific policies, practices, or doctrines that they reported created painful inequalities. Specific issues that were mentioned included the practice of polygamy in the early years of the Church, the fact that only men can be ordained to priesthood offices and thus only men can be in top leadership roles, and the differing expectations for men and women pertaining to missions and parenthood. These issues led a number of our female participants to feel “uncomfortable” in the Church, as illustrated in the following account:

Tessa: I wouldn't say I've always felt uncomfortable, but lately, it just feels like it's not a space that was built for or by women and with their best interest in mind. . . . It's uncomfortable sometimes to be in there when you start becoming aware of all of the differences or discrepancies. . . . As I've gotten older and have daughters of my own, I've been more aware of the disparity between my daughters' and my sons' opportunities . . . I love the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it's always been my norm, my base, and my safe space. So

² Bishops are leaders of local congregations.

there are growing pains with coming to realize that maybe I'm not as comfortable in the roles that were prescribed to me as I used to be.

Some men provided additional insights into how the “deference” to priesthood holders that was often culturally expected created problems. James noted that even when he was serving as a nursery worker, female nursery workers tended to defer to him although “theoretically, there really is no reason whatsoever for that kind of a structure.” Michael recounted an uncomfortable discussion when he and his wife were at the dining table with his parents:

Michael: [My father] got into a little bit of a huff, walked out the door, told my wife to respect the priesthood authority, and closed the door. That is a core memory of my wife that she brings up often when we discuss issues of gender in the Church that she was straight up told that by her father-in-law [to respect priesthood authority].

In addition to this deference to priesthood holders, both the men and the women in our sample discussed how women or motherhood is often placed on a “pedestal” within the Church and the harm or discomfort that this and other instances of benevolent sexism (Haggard et al. 2019) create. In one of the men’s focus groups, Charles noted that he had grown up in a family with no sisters, so “women were a little bit alien creatures” who were placed “on a pedestal.” He said, “I learned later that women can be bad just like men can be bad.” Ben also noted complicated messages around gender:

Ben: I didn’t grow up in a family that felt like women were second class. It was kind of the opposite. But, also, maybe not equal in a way that would have been healthier. There’s a little bit of complex gender stuff.

A similar conversation took place in the women’s focus group regarding the inequality in the importance of motherhood in comparison to fatherhood:

Lauren: I feel like the Church talks about motherhood as the end all, be all of womanhood. So it seems like once you’ve achieved that, you should be done, right? ...

Katie: That’s not all that’s expected of men, is that they’re just like, “Great, you fathered a child, like gold star.” ... But what else?

Despite the many persisting inequalities participants discussed, they also frequently mentioned progress that the Church has made to reduce these inequalities, as seen in the following quote:

Anna: I remember was it 2012, and enough of us started saying, “Hey, why aren’t we praying in General Conference?” You know, I was part of that. And I had a lot of people that are like, “Well, I have enough responsibilities at home, I don’t need to.” That was women, other women that were negating my experience. ... But I’m not going ... to take this. Because now my kids don’t even know that ... women never prayed in [Conference].

The above quote mentions that although previously only men prayed in the Church’s General Conference, now women are sometimes invited to pray in this semi-annual Church-wide Conference.

Theme 2: Intentional Efforts in Discussing or Studying Scriptural Women and Heavenly Mother

Both men and women reported making intentional efforts to seek out stories of women in the scriptures. One participant, James, said, “We do it a lot at our house. We have four daughters and one son, so we really take an active role in that. ... I want my daughters to feel they have role models in the scriptures that they can say, ‘I want to be like this person.’” Other participants discussed that while they didn’t intentionally search for stories about women in the scriptures, they paid more attention to stories about women than ones focusing on men when they came up during normal scripture study. Henry reported studying scripture every day using the Church’s *Come, Follow Me* curriculum and explained, “We don’t actively look for female occurrences in the scriptures when we study, but when we come across some ... we do discuss. Extrapolating is a great idea; dig a little deeper. What are these circumstances? What must she have been going through? ... With the females involved in the scriptures, that is a very appropriate and smart thing to do because it’s obvious, as we all know, that the scriptures were, for the most part, written and compiled by men.” Charlotte said that when she comes across women in the scriptures, “it’s so rare that it’s an oasis ... finally this woman!”

Some participants discussed how they had seen concerted efforts to highlight women’s stories on a Church-wide scale:

Amelia: I think they put a lot of effort in the new *Come, Follow Me* program to include more quotes from female Church leaders, both past and present, and to include female stories. I really do notice almost every lesson has either a story from the scriptures about a woman or it has a quote by a female Church leader.

Across the focus groups, it was clear that whether or not participants intentionally sought out and studied the stories of scriptural women, they noticed and valued these stories because of their rarity. Although an in-depth discussion of the following themes is outside the scope of this paper, we note that participants did report personally connecting to Heavenly Mother in a variety of ways. They also reported barriers to discussing and studying Her, including lacking sufficient information, feeling the topic was "taboo," and worrying about disrespecting Her accidentally or viewing Her as too sacred to openly discuss.

Theme 3: The Impact of Women's Stories

This final theme builds upon the previous one to provide insights into why intentionally seeking out women's stories and elevating women's voices was so important to some participants. Both male and female participants frequently mentioned how they wished there were more stories of women. James reflected, "I feel so strongly about trying to figure out ways to have women in leadership roles in the Church so that men can have that experience in the formative years of having powerful women in leadership roles so they can really see women can be this amazing force for good." And Sophia, another focus group participant, desired that experience for herself and her kids: "I think it's interesting in my growing up and my testimony building ... I didn't recognize how I was just kind of following this kind of patriarchal order where we don't seek women. They don't have power, they don't have influence, so we just stick to the men, until I'm a grown-up woman with children of my own and thinking, 'No, our voice matters. And my story matters.'"

Despite the frustration some participants mentioned at the disparity of women's stories and voices in the scriptures compared to those of men, many also communicated their appreciation for the ways that the Church and the scriptures and the doctrine of Heavenly Mother have strengthened their identity as women, as seen in the following conversation:

Katie: I'm a gospel doctrine teacher in my ward [congregation]. ... [As I teach], I'm always conscientious of ... finding the womanhood in the scriptures and finding the female roles and finding Heavenly Mother. ... Because it's so important for some people to be able to have that female connection in order to feel safe, in order to feel their connection to Deity.

Wendy: I remember hearing the story of Abish³ for the first time and just being so, I don't even know how to explain the first time I had ever heard a woman's story of faith, of her power, of what she brought, and how that affected generations. It was really powerful, and I love that story. That means so much to me but imagine if there were books in the Book of Mormon that I could draw inspiration from.

As seen in Katie's comment, participants also reported making intentional efforts to bring female deity into church conversations. Some had been inspired by stories or discussions of women that were not found in sacred texts but rather were shared in church meetings or taught in sacred temple ceremonies:

James: I will make sure that I always mention Heavenly Mother specifically every time I speak. ... I have noticed that that's starting to make a difference. We've had several of our sacrament meetings, people are starting to just mention Her.

Amelia: I think so much of the stories of women in the scriptures, the strength and power I find in them is what I infer from the stories rather than what it actually says. Like Eve, my hero, but she's my hero because of what I learned in the temple, not what I learned in the scriptures.

Ultimately the impact of hearing and reading women's stories can be deeply personal for many Latter-day Saint women, as seen in this final quote as a participant expressed her gratitude to the other members of the focus group for the opportunity to discuss these issues and share personal experiences with each other:

Wendy: I just appreciate so much being able to be a part of this and being able to experience communion and community with other women who feel similarly. ... I just so appreciate that I got to be a part of this. I know it's for research purposes, but it's been so uplifting for me.

Discussion

The current study explored how women and men who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints orient to the concept of female deity, measured by their perceptions of how often women are discussed in church settings and their own tendencies to study scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. We also examined how their gender ideologies and their experiences

³ Abish is a woman described in Alma 19 in the Book of Mormon.

with sexism are associated with these orientations. Finally, we examined the moderating role of gender in these trends. We found support for almost all hypotheses. The majority of Latter-day Saint women (and many Latter-day Saint men) in our quantitative sample have experienced sexism. Although the data did not capture whether these sexist experiences occurred in church settings, our focus group participants described several examples of sexism experienced at church. Further, they articulated various ways they perceive sexism is perpetuated in the Church, including its patriarchal structure, frequent occurrences of benevolent sexism (Haggard et al. 2019), and some sexist leaders.

We further explored whether experiences with sexism were associated with individuals—specifically, women—(1) intentionally seeking women (scriptural women or Heavenly Mother) in their religious studies or (2) perceiving a lack of discussion of women (scriptural women or Heavenly Mother) at church. As expected, quantitative results showed that discussion of scriptural women or Heavenly Mother at church were quite rare in our sample. However, personal study of these topics was slightly more common, though certainly not frequent. Thus, it appears that the survey respondents tend to engage in personal study of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother as opposed to hearing them addressed in formal church settings. Qualitative results provided additional insights into this, showing that for those who did not intentionally seek out women's stories in the scriptures, their attention to these stories was heightened given their rarity. Focus group interviews further revealed that having daughters and becoming more educated about gender inequalities were important motivators for intentionally seeking out women's stories.

Although church-based discussions of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother would likely be beneficial, the focus groups revealed that personal study has also helped men and women internalize the divine nature of women. Several individuals (spurred on by personal study) have made a point to include discussions of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother each time they taught a lesson or gave a talk in church. Indeed, several focus group participants described how their own personal study affected their identity and feelings of divine worth. However, the lack of formal discussion may discourage others from personal study and leave them wondering whether they should even engage with the topic at all (Majeske et al. 2022).

In the quantitative data, experiences with sexism were directly associated with both personal study and perceptions of church discussion of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother, though these associations depended on

gender. For women, experiences with sexism were associated with a perception of less frequent church discussion of women. However, the opposite was found for men, with more experiences with sexism relating to a perception of more frequent church discussion of women. It is possible that women who have been victims of sexism are particularly attuned to discussion (or lack thereof) surrounding women in formal church settings. Sexism often includes putting down, ignoring opinions, or treating one unfairly because of their gender (Glick and Fiske 2001). It is likely that women who have experienced high levels of this discrimination might notice inequality around gender because of their own experiences. Conversely, men who have experienced sexism (i.e., been made to feel bad about being a man) tend to notice higher levels of church discussion of scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. Given how rare these discussions are in general, it is worth considering whether the typical man simply does not notice when scriptural women or Heavenly Mother are discussed. Men who have experienced sexism may be more attuned to discussions around gender and may simply notice when women are discussed in formal settings.

Experiences with sexism were also associated with higher rates of personal study of Heavenly Mother for women only. Sexism is a distressing event that reduces one's locus of control and beliefs in a fair world, while eliciting significant psychological distress. As a result, it necessitates a coping response (Spencer et al. 1997). There is a wide variety in how women cope with sexism, but for Latter-day Saint women specifically, they may rely on religious teachings as a means of coping and may find particular strength and empowerment in the unique Church teachings about gender—including scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. It is likely that if these same women perceive fewer instances of formal church discussion, they will supplement this with their own personal study. This finding was consistent with the focus groups, where several women discussed the healing power of learning about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. Several described the power of this study in healing wounds of sexism and discovering their divine worth as women. We found that this type of personal study was more common among women than among men. When men experience sexism, they may turn to other coping strategies, perhaps study of Heavenly Father, scriptural men, or Jesus Christ to reinforce their worth as a man.

Finally, we found that—regardless of gender—traditional gender ideology was associated with perceiving more frequent church discussion of women and with having lower levels of personal study. In other words, those that sub-

scribe to more traditional gender roles are likely more satisfied with the infrequency of discussion regarding scriptural women and Heavenly Mother. Traditional ideologies support a belief where it is expected for men to have power and authority—thus, even a brief mention of women feels adequate, and they feel less need to engage in personal study on these topics. Conversely, those with more progressive gender ideologies perceive there is less frequent church discussion of women and likely desire more, given that their views surrounding men and women are more egalitarian in nature. This gap of discussion then feeds into their likelihood of pursuing personal study on these topics.

Limitations

One of the major strengths of the study was that the sample included members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who are a part of a minority religion with specific beliefs on gender. However, this strength also may be a limitation since the findings may not be generalizable to other religions, particularly those without a belief in female deity. Future research might study these associations in other faiths, tailored to each faith's gendered beliefs. Additionally, the sample was cross-sectional, and the direction of results cannot be known. It is possible that a lack of discussion regarding Heavenly Mother or scriptural women may contribute to perceived sexism, as opposed to the model we tested in the current study. Future longitudinal research could explore direction of effects. Our sample was not random but was a convenience sample, meaning the results are not generalizable to all Latter-day Saints. For example, in terms of education level our sample is considerably more educated compared to LDS members in the United States as a whole (i.e., 74.4% of our sample has a four-year college degree vs. 33% of LDS members in the United States; Pew Research Center 2014). This may have affected our findings because education level is tied to gender ideology (Davis and Greenstein 2009), perceptions of sexism (Phillips 2020), religiosity (Schwadel 2015), etc. Additionally, our focus group participants all lived in or near Utah County and thus may only reflect the experiences of Latter-day Saints in that particular area, which is highly saturated with LDS Church members (i.e., 72% of Utah County is LDS compared to 1% of the United States; Public Religion Research Institute, 2020). Also, the sample was self-reported and self-selected, making our conclusions limited and subject to some bias. Individuals who are interested in gender may be more likely to have participated in the study. Finally, our sample consisted primarily of women, so conclusions on men are limited.

Conclusion

We found that, despite enjoying some empowering teachings related to gender (including belief in a Heavenly Mother), members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are not immune to perpetuating or experiencing sexism and hold a range of gender ideologies. Further, our findings suggest that individual experiences with sexism and beliefs about gender are associated with members' religious experiences and behaviors. While men's experiences with sexism do not seem to influence their views or behaviors toward female deity, women who have been the victims of repeated sexism tend to notice a lack of discussion about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother at church and seek out scriptural women and Heavenly Mother more frequently in their personal study. Regardless of gender, the more traditional a Latter-day Saint's gender ideology, the more they perceive that scriptural women and Heavenly Mother are discussed at church and the less they personally study them. Given these quantitative findings, it seems that women who have experienced sexism and members with nontraditional gender ideologies may be susceptible to feeling unwelcome or dissatisfied at church. Our qualitative findings suggest that hearing about scriptural women and Heavenly Mother is deeply meaningful for some members, especially when those members experience and observe gender inequalities in the Church.

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