The Relationship Between Educational Attainment and Gender Inequality

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Introduction

Research has demonstrated time and time again how beneficial education can be. Education has been known to improve health, income, and overall quality of life. Despite the extent of the research on education, research has not explored how education affects views towards gender equality and women in particular. In the present study I will use the General Social Survey 2010 to explore how education relates to feelings about gender equality and sexist attitudes.

Literature Review

Education plays the single most important role in shaping the future of our society. Through education, individuals learn the basic skills necessary to function in a developed civilization. Education can be especially effective in diminishing prejudice and inequalities worldwide and developing tolerant attitudes toward a wide array of minority groups. Carvacho et al. (2013) proposed the hypothesis that social class, specifically education and income, serves as a predictor of prejudice attitudes. To test this hypothesis, they performed a study on 4 representative samples from European countries by measuring income, educational attainment and prejudice attitudes including sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, prejudice toward foreigners, homeless, gay people, Muslims and people with disabilities (Carvacho et al., 2013). The results were consistent with the hypothesis, as education and income increase, levels of prejudice attitudes decrease. However, the study found that education had a much larger impact on the reduction of prejudice than income. The idea that attempts to explain these findings is that low educational attainment prevents individuals from expanding their minds and being exposed to

different groups because of the limited resources that result from the lack of education (Carvacho et al. 2013). While there is plenty of literature on the use of education to combat prejudice and inequalities in general, education has yet to be explored directly in relation to sexism and gender inequality.

Sexism can be defined as prejudice or discrimination on the basis of sex. While sexism affects both genders, it's especially harmful to women in patriarchal societies. Although women have made some important advancements in gender inequality including doubling the number of women in the workforce since the 1950's and surpassing men by making up 60% of U.S. college graduates (Stevens & Martell, 2016), there is still a long way to go before we can achieve true gender equality. According to Жунић (2014), sexism is manifested in five areas: the areas of work, socialization and education, occupation, creativity, and the family. In other words, these are the five main areas of life that are used to systematically restrain women from gaining gender equality. These restraints make it nearly impossible for women to be able to compete with men, especially when you consider that women are expected to be the primary caregiver in the household in our patriarchal society.

This study intends to examine the relationship between the independent variable, education, and two dependent variables: agreeance with traditional gender roles and voting for a woman president. First, traditional gender roles can be defined as beliefs about what someone should or should not do based on their gender, and the negative reactions directed at individuals who violate those rules (Brown & Stone, 2016). For example, men should be the breadwinner

and women should stay at home and take care of the kids. In fact, according to Martin (2011), marriage for women can hinder or even delay career goals due to the struggle for work/life balance. Hochschild & Machung (1989) argues that women are responsible for 70% of household duties, which adds to their stress and further hinders their career advancement. Having children also inhibits women's career advancement as the expected primary caregiver because our society tells us you can either pick a family, or a career, not both. This is yet another mechanism used to keep women in "their place" and from achieving gender equality in a patriarchal society. Secondly, the possible election of the first woman president was very controversial in the recent presidential election. Stevens & Martell (2016) present the staggering statistic that although women make up 51% of the population, women comprise only 20% of government positions including seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives. This is a perfect example of how extraordinarily underrepresented women are in our society which reinforces gender inequality. Women remain marginalized by top governmental, management and leadership positions despite numerous studies showing that corporations with more women in leadership roles not only are more profitable, but are also more productive and innovative (Teague, 2015). This suggests that the reason is less rooted in finding the most competent employee and more as a result of sexist attitudes and discrimination against women.

Now that the existing literature has exposed how much more there is to accomplish in the battle for gender equality, it also offers a solution. Hillygus (2005) argues that "education has consistently been found to increase democratic attitudes and opinions". Teague (2015) agrees

with Hillygus (2005), adding that "education also reduces prejudice and intolerance while increasing support for civil liberties". Stevens & Martell (2016) suggest that education, specifically a sociology class might be the first time students have the opportunity to think critically about sexism or challenge patriarchy. This is especially relevant considering most higher education institutions require students to enroll in at least an introduction to sociology course, which reiterates the importance of education as a tool to diminish sexist attitudes. In fact, Pettijohn, Terry & Walzer (2008) discovered that students who participate in a course on prejudice displayed a significant reduction in racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes. More specifically, the students showed a 68.8% reduction in sexist attitudes as a result of just one course. If education serves as a solution to prejudice in general, it should be effective in eliminating the social barriers responsible for the unattainable expectations placed on women in a patriarchal society and the discrimination they face every day just for being a woman in a man's world.

Gaps in the Literature

Sufficient literature regarding educational attainment and inequality is rather scarce, and when specified to gender inequality the literature is practically nonexistent. In fact, most academic journals have focused on the issue of inequality in higher education instead of education as a means to combat prejudice. In addition to the lack of literature on the subject, the few articles that do touch on education and inequality or sexism are almost entirely qualitative research. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by providing a purely quantitative study that

targets the largely ignored topic of education and prejudice. The few studies that do touch on education and inequality concentrate on high school education and tend to neglect the higher education gained in universities and graduate schools. To account for this gap, this study examines a wide range of educational attainment, including respondents with absolutely no education to respondents with master's degrees. This study is also stronger methodologically than the few quantitative studies that exist on the subject due to the extremely qualified sample from the General Social Survey 2010 which possesses all of the necessary aspects of a strong sample including a large sample of 2,044 respondents that is representative and much more current. Because current research has not yet addressed the specific issue of the relationship between educational attainment and gender inequality, this study is essential to finding the key to ending the sexist attitudes and prejudice that has plagued this country for centuries.

This study intends to explore three main hypotheses:

H1: The amount of education (no HS, high school, college, graduate) is related to one's opinion on traditional gender roles.

H2: The amount of education (no HS, high school, college, graduate) is related to whether or not one would vote for a qualified female president.

H3: One's opinion on traditional gender roles is related to whether or not one would vote for a qualified female president.

Proposed Research Design

An analysis of the secondary data provided by the General Social Survey 2010 will be used to fill the gaps in the literature identified above. The General Social Survey gathers data to study the constantly changing trends in America. Since 1972, the GSS has monitored American demographics, behaviors and attitudes. The General Social Survey 2010 evaluated 2,044 respondents, making it nationally representative, with a strong response rate of 85%. The GSS 2010 was administered in-person. Although in-person surveys provide high response rates, they also present the issue of social desirability bias. The three variables being explored in this study are *educ*, *fefam* and *fepres*. *Educ* asked the respondents what was the highest year of school completed, and the answers ranged from 1 to 20 years of education. *Fefam* asked "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family", and the answers choices originally included strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. However, *fefam* was recoded into a dichotomous nominal variable by combining the responses "strongly agree" and "agree" into "agree", and the responses "strongly disagree" and "disagree" into "disagree". *Fepres* asked "If your party nominated a woman for president, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job?", and the answer choices were yes or no. All hypotheses will be tested by SPSS using bivariate statistics, specifically H1 and H2 using a t-test, and H3 with chi square. Some strengths of this study include the large representative sample and high response rate of the GSS 2010, and the fact that the respondents were randomly selected which gives this study high reliability and validity. The GSS 2010 is also very current compared to other studies on the relationship between sexist attitudes and education. However there is always room for improvement. Some weaknesses

include the fact that the survey was administered in-person which brings the issue of social

desirability bias, the fact that the data used in this study is secondary data instead of primary, and

that the study is strictly quantitative. A mixed methods study including quantitative and

qualitative could provide further insight and detail into the relationship between educational

attainment and sexist attitudes which in turn could offer the reason why this relationship exists in

the first place.

Results

Table 1: Univariate Statistics

Highest Year of School Completed	Percent	Frequency
0	.2	5
1	.0	1
2	.2	5
3	.2	4
4	.4	9
5	.3	6
6	1.5	30
7	.6	12
8	2.2	45
9	2.7	55
10	3.2	66
11	5.3	108
12	27.3	558

13	9.1	186
14	11.2	229
15	5.3	109
16	16.3	334
17	3.5	71
18	4.9	101
19	1.6	33
20	3.5	72
Vote for Woman President	**Percent**	**Frequency**
Yes	66.3	1355
No	2.7	56
Better for Man to Work, Woman Tend Home	**Percent**	**Frequency**
Yes	25.0	511
No	44.4	907

Table 1 shows the univariate analysis of *educ* (highest year of school completed), *fepres* (vote for woman president) and *fefam* (better for man to work, woman tend home)*,* including the range of answers, the percentages and the frequencies. The majority (27.3%) of respondents' highest year of school completed was 12, high school graduate. The majority (66.3%) of respondents said they would vote for a woman president, and the majority (44.4%) reported that they do not agree that it is better for the man to work and the woman to tend the home.

Table 2: Bivariate Statistics (T-Test)

	Vote for Woman President	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance (Two-tailed)
Highest Year of School Completed	Yes	1351	13.47	3.155	.001
	No	55	12.02	2.628	

Table 2 shows the bivariate analysis of the variables highest year of school completed and vote for woman president using a t-test. On average, the respondents who said they would vote for a qualified woman president of their party had 1.5 more years of education than those who would not. The mean for those who would not vote for a woman president (12.02) indicated that on average they had only earned a high school degree and had no further education, whereas those who would vote for a woman president on average had completed about 1.5 years of college education (13.47). The significance was .001 meaning there is a significant relationship between education and whether one would vote for a woman president. The more education one has completed, the more likely they are to vote for a woman president.

Table 3: Bivariate Statistics (T-Test)

	Better for Man to Work,	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance (Two-tailed)

	Woman Tend Home				
Highest Year of School Completed	Agree	510	12.30	3.233	.000
	Disagree	903	14.05	2.915	

Table 3 shows the bivariate analysis of the variables highest year of school completed and better for man to work, woman tend home using a t-test. On average, the respondents who agree that it's better for everyone involved for the man to work and the woman to take care of the home and kids had 1.75 less years of education than those who disagree. The mean for those who agreed with the traditional gender roles (12.30) indicated that on average they had only earned a high school degree and less than one semester of college, whereas those who disagreed on average had completed 1.75, almost 2 years of college education (14.05). The significance was .000 meaning there is a highly significant relationship between education and whether one agrees that it's better for the man to work and the woman to tend home. The more education one has completed, the less likely they are to agree with traditional gender roles.

Table 4: Bivariate Statistics (Chi Square)

		Vote for Woman President		P-Value	Asymptotic Significance (2 sided)
		Yes	No		
Better for Man to Work, Woman Tend Home	Agree	465 Expected: 481	36 Expected: 20	20.619a	.000
	Disagree	879 Expected: 863	20 Expected: 36		

Table 4 shows the bivariate analysis of the variables vote for woman president and better for man to work, woman tend home using chi square. There were 465 respondents who would vote for a woman president and agree that it's better for the man to work and the woman to take care of the house and kids (traditional gender roles), whereas the expected count was 481. However, 36 respondents would not vote for a woman president but disagree with traditional gender roles, as opposed to the expected count which was 20. There were 879 respondents who would vote for a woman president and disagree with traditional gender roles, compared to only 863 from the expected count. Lastly, 20 respondents would not vote for a woman president yet disagree with traditional gender roles, compared to the expected count of 36. The asymptotic significance was .000, meaning there is a highly significant relationship between voting for a woman president and agreeance with traditional gender roles.

Conclusions

In conclusion, all three hypotheses were supported, there is a significant relationship between all three variables; highest year of school completed, voting for a qualified woman president and agreeance with the traditional gender role that the man should work and the woman should tend the home. Therefore, the higher one's educational attainment, the less sexist

attitudes and prejudice one will experience. This is a very influential finding considering that

existing literature has yet to cover this positive relationship, and could prove to be very useful to

the third wave of the feminist movement. One direction for further research would be the

replication of my study to evaluate the reliability and perhaps identify what specific aspect of

education is responsible for the associated reduction of sexist attitudes. For example, is it the

particular curriculum that affects prejudice feelings? Or could it be the fact that students become

more exposed to different people and ideas through higher education? Another intriguing

direction for further research would be to include a multivariate analysis to control for age and

other factors. This would improve the study by eliminating the possibility of the relationship

between education and sexism being a spurious relationship or being caused by an outside factor.

For example, age also exposes people to more diverse people and ideas and could be responsible

for the diminishing impact on sexist attitudes. Demonstrating how educational attainment can be

used to reduce sexist attitudes is of primary importance as it increases the awareness of a solution

to these prejudice feelings and may contribute to the breaking down of patriarchal barriers that

can ultimately lead to the achievement of gender equality.

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