

The Effect of Implicit and Explicit Sexism on Reproductive Rights Attitudes*

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A wealth of public opinion research demonstrates that party identification and religious beliefs are strongly associated with Americans support for abortion. There is less consistent link between gender attitudes and support for abortion. In this paper, we explore how both explicit and implicit sexism shape reproductive rights attitudes. We posit that hostile sexism, an ideology that endorses the belief that women are inferior to men and that calls for gender equality are threats to mens social dominance.

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While the controversy over a women’s reproductive rights is closely linked to partisan politics today, this was not the case in 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled that women have a constitutional right to abortion in *Roe vs. Wade*. At the time, among both elite and mass citizens, Democrats and Republicans were equally divided on the issue, with Democrats actually being slightly more pro-life (Adams, 1997; Carmines and Woods, 2002). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, pro-choice and pro-life interest groups pushed Democratic and Republican elites into their respective corners on the issue and the mass public followed suit (Adams, 1997; Killian and Wilcox, 2008; Levendusky, 2009). Anti-abortion interest groups were motivated by both religious beliefs as well as opposition to gender equality (Carmines, Gerrity and Wagner, 2010). In the late 1970s, a woman’s reproductive rights (e.g., birth control, abortion, etc.) was inextricably linked to the push for gender equality and counter-movements, such as Phyllis Schlafly’s anti-gender equality STOP ERA organization, pushed the Republican Party to take a strong position in opposition to abortion.

Considerable research shows that religious beliefs and partisanship are now strongly associated with Americans’ support for abortion rights (Adamczyk, 2013; Jelen and Wilcox, 2003; Layman, 1999, e.g.). In contrast, studies of public opinion show a less consistent link between gender attitudes and support for abortion (Barkan, 2014; Jelen and Wilcox, 2003; Patel and Johns, 2009). More recent literature suggests that reproductive rights attitudes are shaped by factors beyond traditional predictors such as religiosity and ideology. For example, attitudes towards sexual morality have a strong relationship with abortion attitudes (Jelen 2014). In this paper, we build on a burgeoning area of research that conceptualizes sexism and the opposition to gender equality that it entails as a way of justifying male dominance (Cassese and Holman, 2018; Jost and Kay, 2005). Sexism is an ambivalent form of prejudice in which antipathy toward women who seek to undermine male dominance coexists with the idealization of women who occupy the roles carved out for women in the patriarchal system — wives, mothers, and homemakers in need of male protection (Glick and Fiske, 2001). By separating *hostile* and *benevolent* forms of sexism, recent research shows a clearer link between gender attitudes and support for abortion (Begun and Walls, 2015; Hodson and MacInnis, 2017; Huang et al., 2016; Petterson and Sutton, 2018). We extend this research by investigating how both implicit and explicit gender attitudes shape people’s support for abortion rights and by considering a broader set of attitudes about reproductive rights beyond abortion.

We analyze data from two studies. The first comes from the 2016 American National Election

Study, which collected data from a nationally representative sample in the US on sexist attitudes, gender roles, and views on abortion. We find a robust correlation between sexism, gender role attitudes, and opposition to abortion. The second study was developed by us and drawn from a high-quality web panel. This study featured more extensive batteries of questions tapping sexist attitudes, an implicit attitude test to tap nonconscious beliefs about gender roles, and a broader measure of reproductive rights that includes abortion and birth control access. We continue to find a robust connection between sexist attitudes and attitudes about women’s reproductive rights, but these refined measures offer evidence that hostile sexist attitudes have a stronger connection to reproductive rights than do benevolent sexist attitudes, and that implicit gender bias motivates opposition to birth control access, above and beyond explicitly held sexist attitudes. This work illustrates how the various manifestations of sexism have different implications for attitudes about women’s reproductive rights.

What do Ambivalent Sexism and Gender Roles Have to do with Reproductive Rights?

Sexism is “...a special case of prejudice marked by a deep ambivalence, rather than uniform antipathy, toward women” (Glick and Fiske, 1996, 491). As a more commonly conceived form of prejudice (e.g., Allport, Clark and Pettigrew, 1954), *hostile sexism* defines women as a group in competition to men, vying for social dominance. Someone who holds strong hostile sexist attitudes believes that women are inferior to men and, thus, incapable and unworthy of power. As a result, this person is hostile toward women who do not accept their assigned roles in the patriarchy and perceive calls for gender equality as a ploy to usurp men’s power and assert dominance over men. In contrast, *benevolent sexism* adopts a more positive, but ultimately patronizing and paternalistic, view of women. It shares with hostile sexism the notion that women are not capable of wielding power, and because of this, sees them as being in need of protection by men. As separate dimensions of sexism, individuals can be low on both (non-sexists) and high on both (ambivalent sexists), but they can also be high on one dimension and low on another. Hostile sexists are those who only see women as a threat to men’s power, while benevolent sexist tend to simply see women as fragile, precious, and possessing moral superiority (Glick and Fiske, 1996). These varying patterns of sexist attitudes often have different attitudinal and behavioral implications. Hostile sexists are more likely

to condone violence toward women, including rape (Begany and Milburn, 2002; Masser, Viki and Power, 2006), whereas benevolent sexists react negatively toward overtly crude, hostile treatment of women (Cassese and Holman, 2018).

The mixture of negative and putatively positive stereotypes that make up hostile and benevolent forms of sexism create “complementary gender stereotypes” that offer a justification for gender inequality (Jost and Kay, 2005). Because the positive qualities ascribed to women — warm, caring, and relationship-oriented — are ones that men are supposed to lack, women help round out their male counterparts (e.g., they are the “better halves”). At the same time, women are said to lack the leadership skills — competent, assertive, and independent — that are attributed to men. As such, taken together men and women possess a mix of positive and negative stereotypes that complement one another and provide a rationale for why women’s place is in the home and men’s place is in the public sphere. Moreover, ambivalent sexist attitudes are prevalent among both men and women. Although women tend to express fewer sexist attitudes than men, some women do indeed buy into hostile and benevolent stereotypes as a way to “. . . justify and maintain the status quo” (Jost and Kay, 2005, 498). In the domain of politics, ambivalent sexism shapes how people perceive women candidates, leading them to have different standards of evaluations for men and women politicians (Barnes and Beaulieu, 2014; Barnes, Beaulieu and Saxton, 2018; Cassese and Holman, 2018; Valentino, Wayne and Ocen, 2018).

In addition, individuals need not be fully aware that they hold sexist stereotypes. Notions that women’s roles are confined to being homemakers and mothers can be internalized and held at a nonconscious “implicit” level (Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004). When people formulate an attitude or a behavioral intention, their minds first draw on a network of nonconscious processes that serve as a starting point for conscious thought (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999; Lodge and Taber, 2013). Sometimes these intuitions are incorporated into people’s attitudes and behavior without much consideration and guide people’s political decisions outside of people’s awareness (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen, 2017). Recent research establishes that people possess gender stereotypes at an implicit level, and that these implicit gender stereotypes influence people’s attitudes toward female candidates above and beyond their explicitly stated gender attitudes (Mo, 2015).

Despite the fact that arguments in favor of women’s reproductive often invoke gender equality, initial research failed to find evidence of a robust link between gender attitudes and support

for women’s reproductive rights (Barkan, 2014; Jelen and Wilcox, 2003; Patel and Johns, 2009). Recent scholarship seems to find a clearer relationship between gender attitudes and support for abortion rights when hostile and benevolent forms of sexism are measured separately. Nonetheless, the emerging evidence remains inconclusive. Some scholars find a positive correlation between opposition to abortion and both forms of ambivalent sexism (Begun and Walls, 2015; Hodson and MacInnis, 2017), while others find only evidence for a correlation between abortion attitudes and benevolent sexism (Huang et al., 2016) or hostile sexism (Pettersson and Sutton, 2018).

These inconclusive findings may arise from the fact that most of these studies come from small convenience samples collected on college campuses, and they all focus on a relatively limited definition of reproductive rights that centers on abortion. People’s attitudes about abortion tend to be relatively crystalized and heavily linked to moral absolutes (Mooney and Schuldt, 2008; Ryan, 2014), whereas broader policy attitudes about women’s reproductive rights — such as access to birth control — are more malleable (Arceneaux and Kolodny, 2009). From a theoretical standpoint, there are reasons to anticipate that both benevolent and hostile sexism will correlate with opposition to reproductive rights for women, since both forms of sexism are about circumscribing women’s roles to the household as wives and mothers under the protection of men. Nonetheless, we hypothesize that hostile sexism will have a stronger connection to attitudes about women’s reproductive rights. Hostile sexists should be more likely than benevolent sexists to perceive reproductive rights as an especially intolerable assault on men’s power and dominance. Access to birth control, for instance, allows women to eschew motherhood without forgoing sexual gratification and makes it possible to time childbearing in such a way that opens avenues to careers and leadership positions once only available to men. Moreover, broad reproductive rights for women takes family planning decisions out of the hands of men. While benevolent sexists can also see reproductive rights in these terms, they could also view access to birth control and abortion as a way to protect women from unwanted pregnancies. As a result, we expect the link between benevolent sexism and reproductive rights to be more tenuous.

In addition to investigating the link between benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and a reproductive rights more broadly defined, we also will investigate the extent to which implicit gender biases motivate opposition to expanding women’s access to abortion and birth control. Research suggests that policy preferences are not always driven by explicit preferences, but rather implicit preferences

(Friesen, Smith, & Hibbing 2017; Smith et al. 2012). The psychological literature suggests that implicit gender biases should motivate opposition to policies that make it possible for women to pursue careers, even after accounting for explicit attitudes about gender roles.

Hypotheses

The literature suggests that both hostile and ambivalent sexist will be related to less support for reproductive rights for women. However, we expect that hostile sexism will be a stronger predictor of reproductive rights attitudes. Again, we predict that hostile sexists will be particularly disapproving of the threat that reproductive rights pose to men's dominance over women.

H1: Both hostile and benevolent sexism will be related to less support for abortion.

H2: Both hostile and benevolent sexism will be related to less support for birth control access.

H3: Hostile sexism will be a stronger predictor of abortion and birth control attitudes than benevolent sexism.

We also explore the connection between implicit sexism and reproductive rights attitudes. Implicit sexism is held at the unconscious level. This type of bias occurs outside of our awareness and reflects the automatic associations we have been socialized to make. Even those who do not display hostile or benevolent sexist attitudes can still be implicitly sexist. We test whether this more subtle and inadvertent form of sexism can impact reproductive rights attitudes. In particular, we expect that those who are more implicitly sexist will display less support for access to birth control than those who are less implicitly sexist. We do not expect implicit sexism to have any impact on abortion attitudes. We anticipate this finding due to the crystallized nature of abortion attitudes. It is unlikely that this more subtle form of sexism would impact relatively stable abortion attitudes. However, we do expect that implicit sexism will modestly impact attitudes about birth control.

H4: Higher levels of implicit sexism will predict lower levels of support for birth control.

H5: There will be no relationship between implicit sexism and abortion attitudes.

Study 1

For Study 1, we used the nationally-representative 2016 American National Election Study (n=2,726) data to assess the relationship between hostile sexism and abortion attitudes. The ANES relies on

a probability sample of eligible voters in the United States. Table 1 displays sample demographic information from the ANES data.

Table 1:

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Democrat	4,248	0.457	0.498	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Republican	4,248	0.407	0.491	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Female	4,219	0.529	0.499	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Education	4,227	11.171	2.325	1.000	9.000	13.000	16.000
Age	4,150	49.576	17.581	18.000	34.000	63.000	90.000
Income	4,069	15.387	8.080	1.000	9.000	22.000	28.000
Ideology	3,050	4.134	1.553	1.000	3.000	6.000	7.000
White	4,238	0.717	0.451	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000

Measures

The 2016 ANES uses several different measures to tap gender attitudes. The Modern Sexism Index (MSI) was included which consists of three items: 1.) How much attention should the media pay to discrimination against women?, 2) When women demand equality these days, how often are they actually seeking special favors?, and 3) When women complain about discrimination, how often do they cause more problems than they solve? The ANES also included a question about traditional gender roles which asked respondents if it was "Better if a man works and a woman takes care of the home." An abbreviated version of the hostile sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske 1996) tapped gender attitudes as well. The benevolent sexism subscale was not included on the ANES. Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 1) Many women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist; 2) Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them; 3) Women seek to gain power by getting control over men; and 4) Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she tries to put him on a tight leash. The traditional gender roles question was coded such that higher values indicated more alignment with traditional gender roles. To create scales for the Modern Sexism Index and the hostile sexism items, we took the mean of all the responses. We standardized the scales such that scores ranged from 0 to 1. Alpha values indicated a high reliability for both the Modern Sexism Index (alpha =.94) and the hostile sexism subscale (alpha= .79). Higher scores on the MSI and the hostile sexism subscale indicated higher levels of sexism. Although we are chiefly focused on the effect of hostile sexism on abortion attitudes, we also evaluate the effect of the other

two operationalizations of sexism on abortion attitudes.¹

We measured religiosity with three items tapping religious fundamentalism, the importance of religion in day to day life, and church or religious service attendance. Maximum likelihood factor analysis was conducted on these three items to yield a religiosity scale. Latent factors were allowed to correlate. Scores on the scale ranged from -1.24 to 1.34 with a standard deviation of .92. We also controlled for gender, age, income, education, ideology and party identification. Gender was coded with women as the reference category. Age was measured in years. Income was measured on a 28-point scale from "Under \$5,000" to "\$250,000 or more." Education was measured on a scale from "less than first grade" to "Doctorate degree." Ideology was measured on a 7-point scale from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative."

Finally, the question on the ANES that tapped abortion attitudes was "There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?" Response categories were, 1) By law, abortion should never be permitted; 2) By law, only in case of rape, incest, or a woman's life in danger; 3) By law, for reasons other than rape, incest, or woman's life in danger if need established; 4) By law, abortion as a matter of personal choice. Response categories were coded such that higher scores indicated more liberal abortion attitudes.

Results

To analyze the impact of sexism on abortion attitudes, we ran an ordered logit model regressing hostile sexism, as well as modern sexism and traditional gender role attitudes, on our abortion variable. Table 1 displays the results of the regression model. Due to the inclusion of only the hostile sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, we can only test Hypothesis 1 with the ANES data. Strong evidence was found for the hypothesis that hostile sexism is related to less support for abortion access. Hostile sexism, modern sexism, and traditional gender role attitudes were all significant negative predictors of abortion attitudes. Table 2 displays the results of the

¹Although they are correlated, all three measures tap relatively different aspects of sexism and gender attitudes. Modern sexism and traditional gender role attitudes are only weakly positively correlated ($r=.17$), hostile sexism and traditional gender role attitudes are also only weakly positively correlated ($r=.21$), whereas hostile sexism and modern sexism are moderately correlated ($r=.43$).

ordered logit regression model. Other significant predictors of abortion attitudes were ideology, religiosity, age, education, income, and identification with the Democratic Party.

Study 2

To further explore the link between explicit and implicit sexism and reproductive rights attitudes, we recruited 1,409 respondents via the survey platform, Prolific to take part in a "Gender Identity and Political Attitude" survey in the Winter of 2018 (see Supporting Materials for more information on recruitment). Participants were paid \$1.50 to take part in the 15 minute long study. The benefit of using Prolific is that they have algorithms in place to fairly allocate study spaces, decreasing the issue of utilizing non-naive participants (Chandler et al. 2015). They also have a rate limiting mechanism in place to distribute studies across the entire participant pool.

Measures

Participants first consented to the study and then responded to demographic questions, personality batteries, questions measuring political predispositions and social dominance orientation, as well as the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). The Bem Sex Role Inventory is a commonly used measure of gender expression and gender roles. All participants completed the Gender-Career Implicit Attitude Test (IAT). The purpose of the IAT is to measure implicit gender attitudes in a way that is not subject to social desirability bias. In the congruent task, participants had to match up common male names with words related to work and careers, and match up common female names with words related family and home life. In the incongruent task, participants had to match male names with words related to family and home life and female names with words related to work and careers. The resulting D-Score measure is computed based on the difference in performance speeds between the two classification tasks.² Participants completed items from both the Hostile and Benevolent sexism scales in the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske, 1996). There were five items from the hostile sexism scale, two of which were the same items as the ones included on the ANES ("Women seek to gain power by getting control over men" and "Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash"). Respondents were also asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 1) Women are too eas-

²To compute the D-Score, we used the improved IAT algorithm specified in Greenwald et al. (2003) and the IAT package in R.

Table 2:

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	abortion support
	(Ordered Logistic Regression)
hostile sexism	−0.890*** (0.257)
traditional gender roles	−0.123*** (0.031)
modern sexism	−0.919*** (0.225)
ideology	−0.361*** (0.040)
religiosity	−1.016*** (0.051)
age	0.012*** (0.002)
education	0.091*** (0.020)
income	0.013** (0.006)
race	−0.049 (0.102)
female	0.011 (0.083)
republican	−0.201 (0.143)
democrat	0.236* (0.142)
Observations	2,726
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

ily offended; 2) Women exaggerate problems they have at work; and 3) When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against. The benevolent sexism subscale items were: 1) Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess; 2) Women should be cherished and protected; 3) Every man ought to have a woman he adores; 4) Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility; and 5) Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste. Alpha values indicated a high reliability for both the hostile sexism subscale ($\alpha=.92$) and the benevolent sexism subscale ($\alpha=.84$). We standardized the scales such that scores ranged from 0 to 1.

We included a relatively extensive number of questions to tap both abortion attitudes and birth control attitudes. To measure abortion attitudes, participants were first asked "Is abortion never justified, always justified, or somewhere in between? Please place yourself on this continuum (0 being abortion is never justified and 10 being abortion is always justified)." After this general abortion question, participants were asked "Under the following conditions, do you think pregnant women should be allowed to obtain a legal abortion...". The nine conditions ranged from "If the pregnancy was caused by rape" to "If the pregnancy was caused by a casual encounter." The full battery of conditions can be found in the Appendix. All items were coded such that higher values indicated more support for abortion access. To tap birth control attitudes, participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: 1) The government should make it easier for women to obtain birth control, 2) The easy availability of birth control encourages women to be irresponsible when it comes to a decision about sex, 3) Single women should not be able to obtain birth control, 4) Federal health insurance should pay for abortions, and 5) Men should have NO say in a woman's decision about birth control. To create separate scales for both abortion and birth control attitudes, we took the mean responses for the items and standardized the scales to range from 0 to 1.

1 Results

To test our hypotheses, we ran two OLS regression models regressing implicit, hostile, and benevolent sexism on the abortion and birth control scales. We controlled for age, race, income, education, party identification, religiosity, and gender. Table 3 displays the results of those regressions. Because we included both subscales of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, we were able to test the

relationship between both benevolent sexism and hostile sexism, and birth control and abortion attitudes. We speculated that both hostile and benevolent sexism would be related to less support for abortion support (Hypothesis 1) and birth control support (Hypothesis 2). We posited that because both hostile and benevolent sexism are related to the circumscription of women to the home and to some extent, the maintenance of traditional gender roles, both forms of sexism would be related to less support for abortion and birth control access. Our results indicate that in fact, only hostile sexism is associated with less support for women’s reproductive rights. This provides only a partial confirmation of Hypotheses 1 and 2. Figures 1 and 2 display the effect of hostile sexism on abortion and birth control support. These findings fully support our third hypothesis that hostile sexism is a stronger predictor of abortion and birth control attitudes than benevolent sexism.

Table 3:

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Abortion Support	Birth Control Support
	(1)	(2)
IAT	-0.014 (0.017)	-0.040*** (0.014)
Constant	0.756*** (0.006)	0.806*** (0.005)
Observations	1,386	1,386
R ²	0.001	0.006
Adjusted R ²	-0.0002	0.006
Residual Std. Error (df = 1384)	0.215	0.169
F Statistic (df = 1; 1384)	0.713	8.818***

Note:

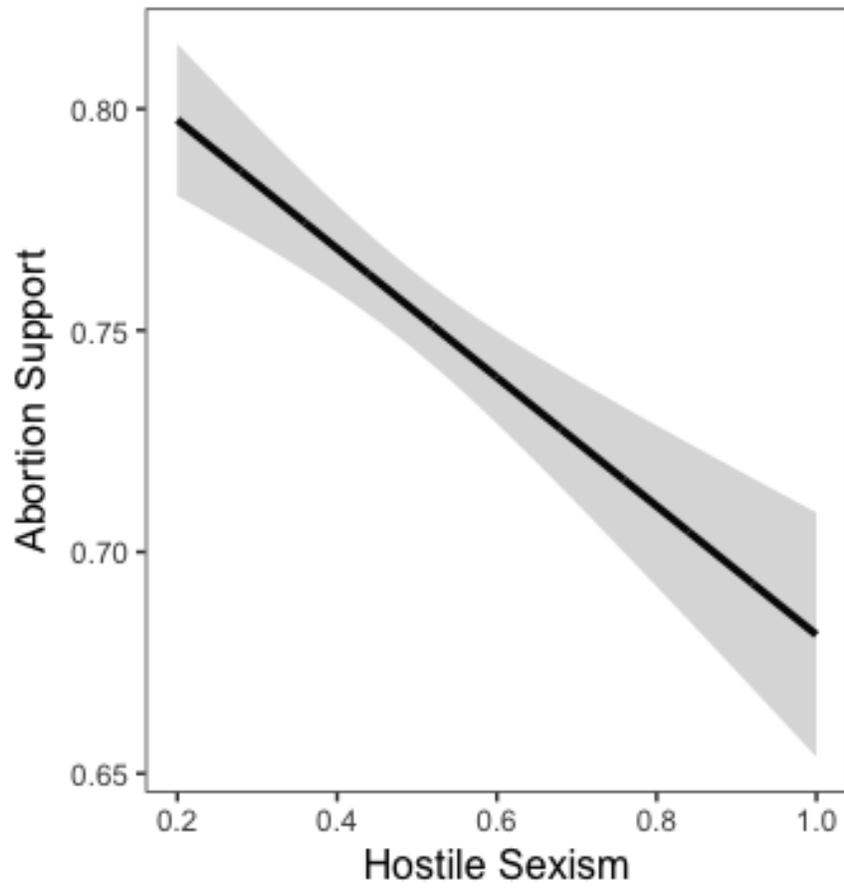
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

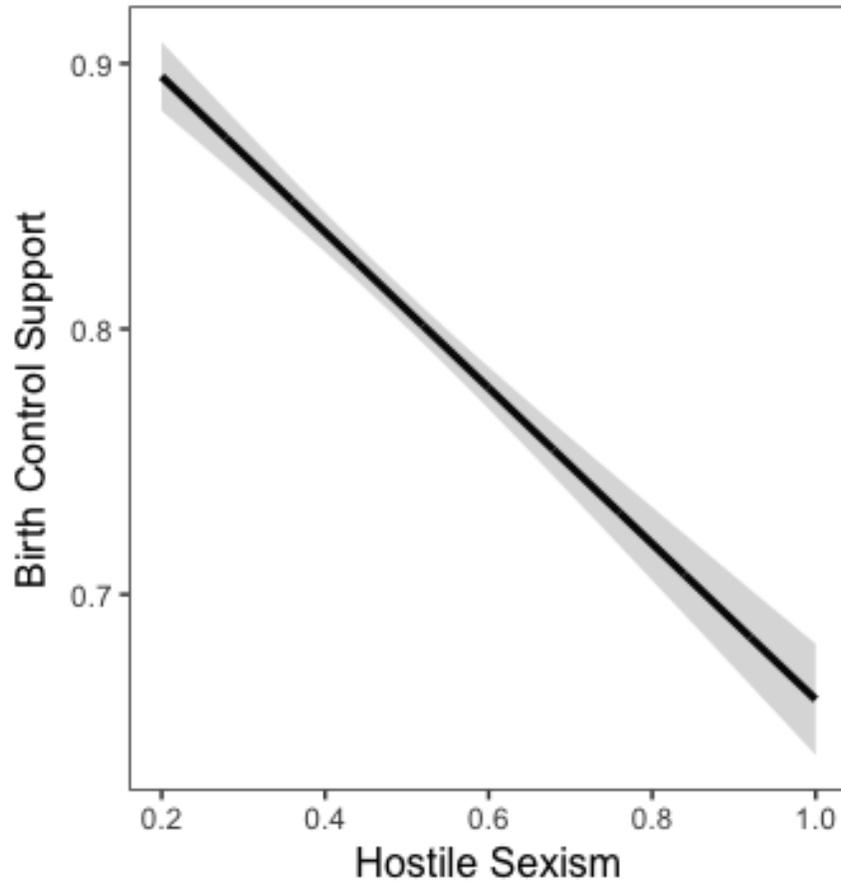
Table 4:

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Abortion Support (OLS)	Birth Control Support (OLS)
implicit sexism	0.012 (0.014)	-0.008 (0.010)
hostile sexism	-0.145*** (0.026)	-0.293*** (0.020)
benevolent sexism	-0.005 (0.029)	-0.026 (0.022)
age	-0.001*** (0.0004)	-0.0002 (0.0003)
race	-0.012 (0.012)	0.009 (0.009)
income	0.005*** (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
education	0.010*** (0.004)	-0.0005 (0.003)
democrat	0.062*** (0.010)	0.036*** (0.008)
republican	-0.074*** (0.014)	-0.057*** (0.011)
religiosity	-0.024*** (0.001)	-0.010*** (0.001)
female	0.015 (0.010)	0.057*** (0.007)
Constant	0.967*** (0.028)	1.010*** (0.021)
Observations	1,345	1,345
R ²	0.431	0.473
Adjusted R ²	0.426	0.468
Residual Std. Error (df = 1333)	0.163	0.124
F Statistic (df = 11; 1333)	91.622***	108.561***

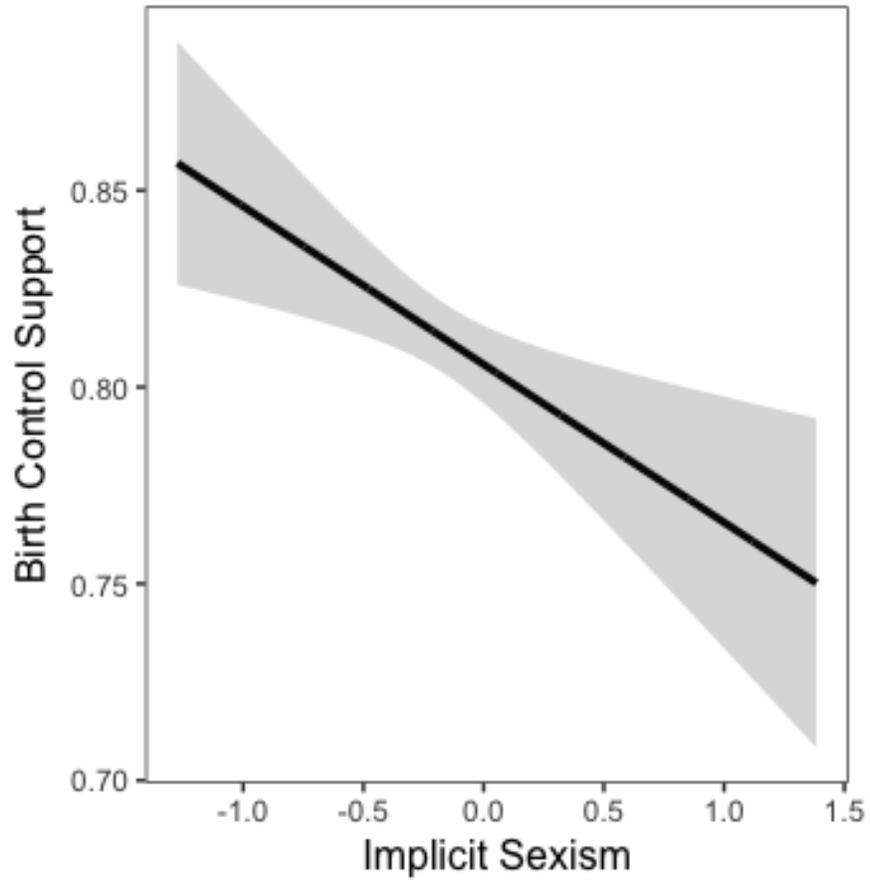
Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01





No support was found for the hypothesis that implicit sexism is related to lower levels of birth control support (Hypothesis 4). Hostile sexism seems to be the main driver of opposition to women's reproductive rights. As expected, implicit sexism was not a significant predictor of abortion rights (Hypothesis 5).

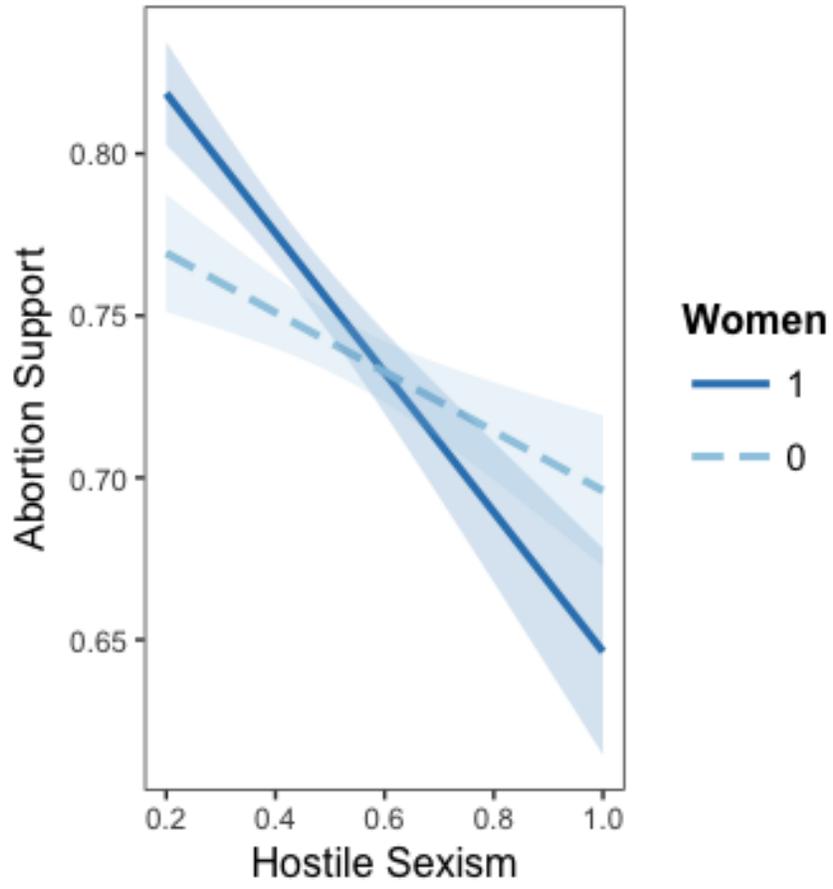


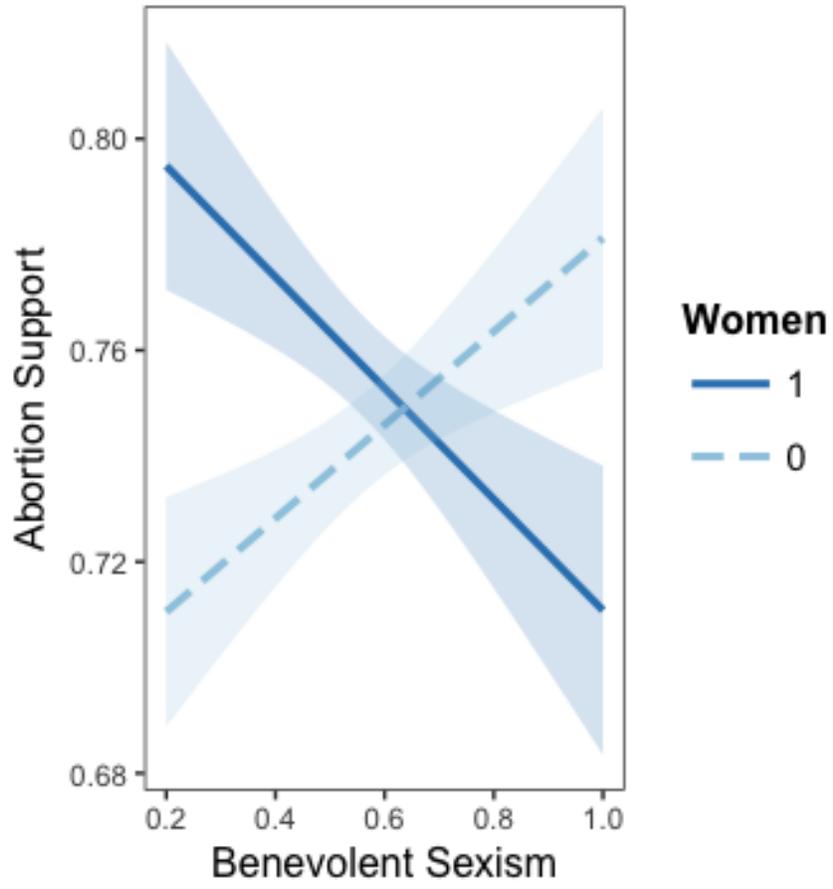
2 Sexism, Gender, and Reproductive Rights Attitudes

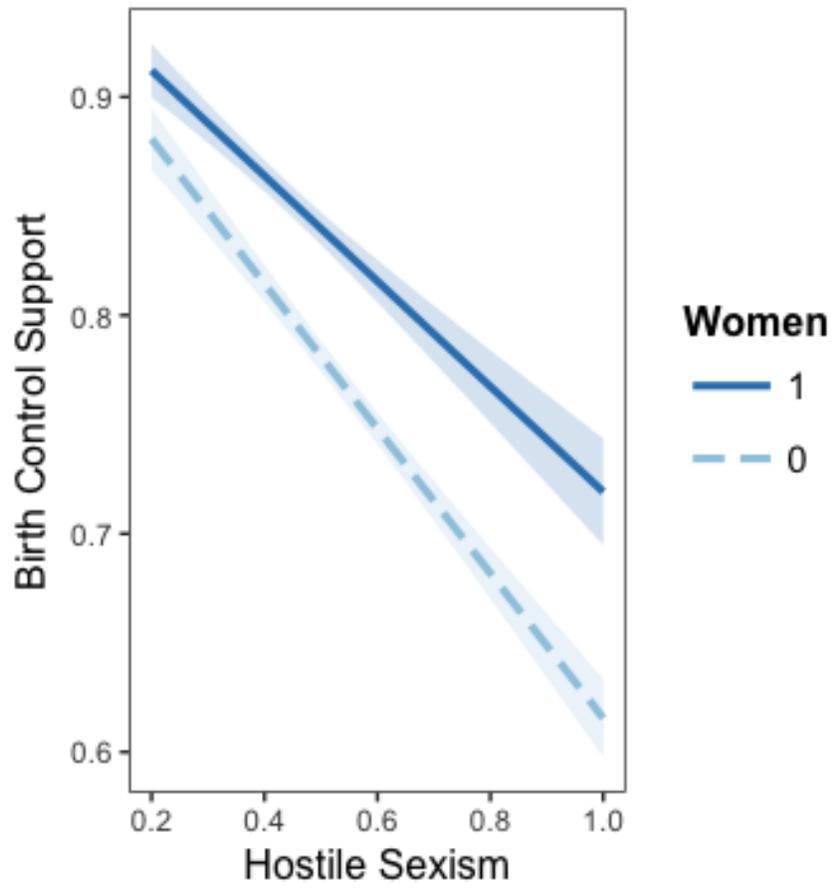
Finally, we wanted to explore the relationship between gender, sexism, and reproductive rights attitudes.

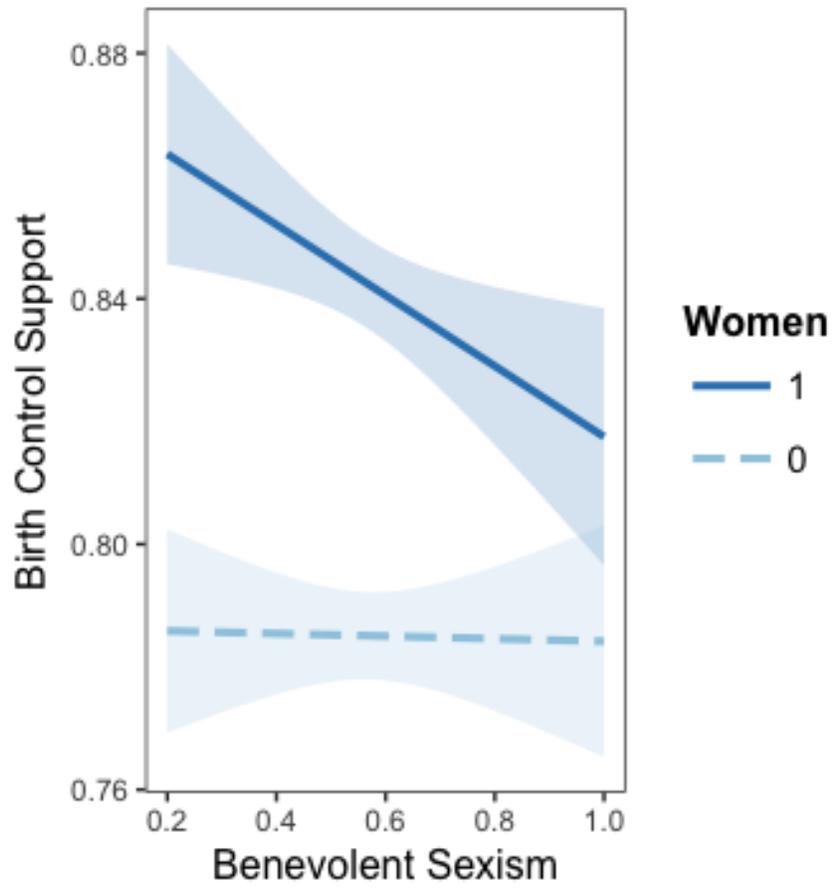
Table 5:

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Abortion Support	Birth Control Support
	(1)	(2)
IAT	0.004 (0.018)	-0.022 (0.014)
female	0.185*** (0.031)	0.049** (0.024)
hostilerecode	-0.092*** (0.033)	-0.331*** (0.025)
benevolentrecode	0.088** (0.038)	-0.002 (0.029)
age	-0.001*** (0.0004)	-0.0002 (0.0003)
white	-0.015 (0.012)	0.008 (0.009)
income	0.005*** (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
education	0.007* (0.004)	-0.0004 (0.003)
Democrat	0.060*** (0.010)	0.037*** (0.008)
Republican	-0.072*** (0.014)	-0.057*** (0.011)
religiosityscale	-0.024*** (0.001)	-0.010*** (0.001)
IAT:female	0.008 (0.027)	0.030 (0.021)
female:hostilerecode	-0.124** (0.050)	0.090** (0.038)
female:benevolentrecode	-0.193*** (0.055)	-0.055 (0.042)
Constant	0.897*** (0.030)	1.014*** (0.023)
Observations	1,345	1,345
R ²	0.444	0.476









Discussion

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