UC San Diego
SCHOOL OF GLOBAL POLICY AND STRATEGY

TULANE UNIVERSITY
Newcomb Institute

BELIEFS ABOUT WOMEN AND WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN CALIFORNIA: FINDINGS FROM THE CALIFORNIA 2025 VEX SURVEY

VEXData
VIOLENCE EXPERIENCES SURVEY

2026

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

Beliefs about women and women's equality, including beliefs about women's leadership fitness, the veracity of sexual harassment and assault claims, and reproductive rights, have downstream consequences for women's economic opportunity, political leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship (1-4). A recent report ranking the 50 states across 17 key indicators of gender equality related to employment, health, and political empowerment ranked California relatively high, at number 7 (5). However, issues of gender-based violence persist in California, and variation in beliefs regarding the value of women are not well understood in the state. In this brief, we examine Californians' beliefs about women's equality in leadership and education, the importance of abortion for women's health, and the veracity of women who make public allegations of sexual harassment or assault, using statewide data from CalVEX 2025.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

CalVEX (the California Violence Experiences Survey) 2025 involved survey data collection with a statedies sample of approximately 4000 adults residing in California. (See details on methods in Appendix A.) Survey participants were asked about their level of agreement with five statements related to beliefs regarding women and women's equality. The statements are noted in the section on study findings. Participants could respond to each item as: strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree. We re-categorized responses as agree, neutral, and disagree and present weighted prevalence (i.e., population-based prevalence estimates) of responses to each statement by gender.

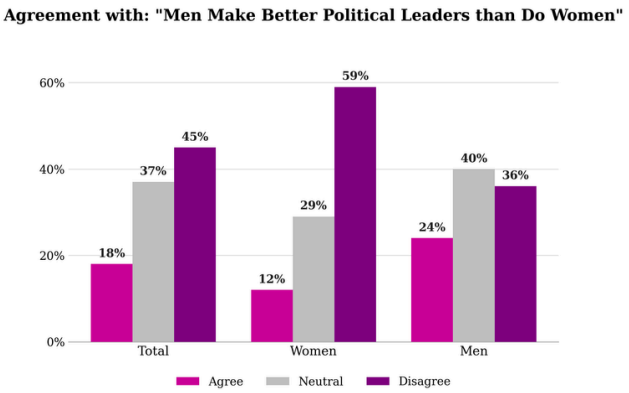
FINDINGS

1. "Men Make Better Political Leaders than Do Women"

• A minority of men and women agreed with the statement that men make better political leaders. Men were more likely than women to agree (24% of men vs. 12% of women).

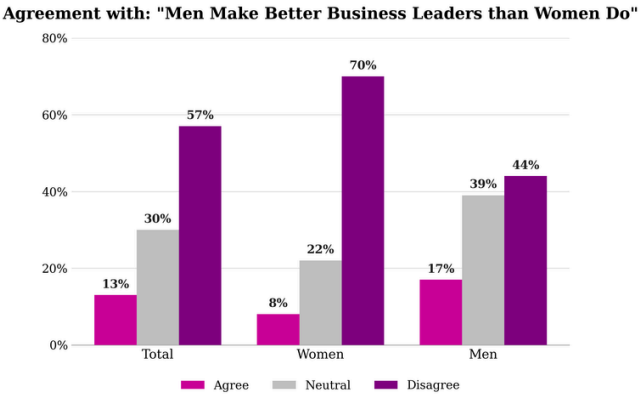
• Disagreement with the statement was higher among women (59%) than men (36%).

• Neutral responses were common for women and men (35%).



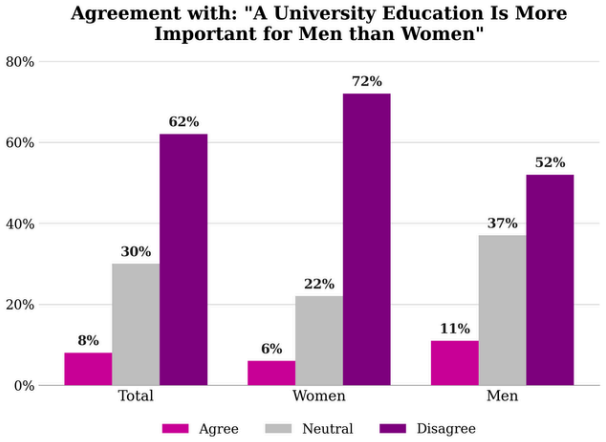
2. "Men Make Better Business Leaders than Women Do"

• A minority of men (17%) and women (8%) agreed with the statement that men make better business leaders.
• Disagreement with the statement was higher among women (70%) than men (44%).
• Neutral responses were more common for men (39%) than women (22%).



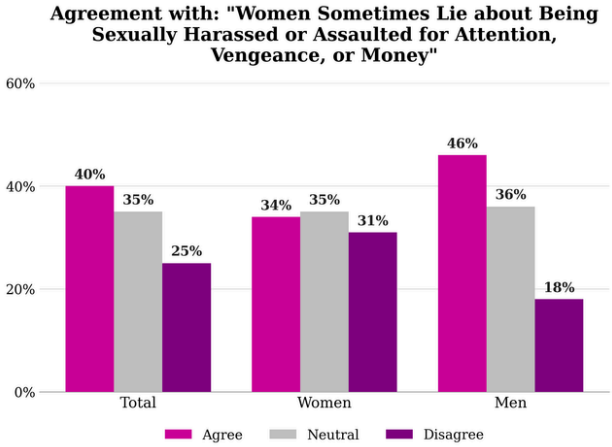
3. "A University Education is More Important for Men than Women"

• A minority of men (11%) and women (6%) agreed with the statement that a university education was more important for men.
• Disagreement with the statement was higher among women (72%) than men (52%).
• Neutral responses were more common for men (37%) than women (22%).



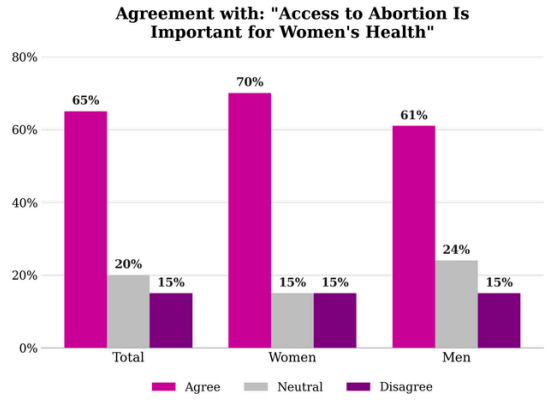
4. "Women Sometimes Lie about Being Sexually Harassed or Assaulted for Attention, Vengeance, or Money"

• One in three women (34%) and almost half of all men (46%) agreed with this statement.
• Smaller percentages of women (31%) and men (18%) disagreed with the statement.
• Neutral responses were common for both women (34%) and men (36%).



5. "Access to Abortion is Important for Women's Health"

• Most men and women in California agree with that abortion access is an important women's health issue (70% of women; 61% of men).
• The prevalence of disagreement is comparable by gender (15%).
• Neutral responses were slightly less likely to be seen for this item than other study items; for California, 15% of women and 24% of men gave a neutral response.



CONCLUSION

These findings show a mixed picture of beliefs about women and women's equality in California. While most people do not strongly endorse unequal views in key areas such as women's leadership in politics and business, or the value of a university education for women, a notable subset of Californians indicate women have less capability in these areas than men, with men more likely than women to hold beliefs of male superiority or priority on these issues.

A particularly alarming finding is the pervasive skepticism of women's sexual harassment and assault claims. We find that nearly half of men and more than 1 in 3 women in California believe that women sometimes lie about sexual harassment and assault for personal gain or attention. This belief is inconsistent with decades of documentation of under-reporting of sexual harassment and assault, as well as low prevalence of false allegations (6). It does, however, align with research from the Pew Research Center in 2018 that found, with a sample of U.S. adults, that 31% believe that false allegations of sexual harassment and assault are a serious concern (6). These findings indicate that the #MeToo movement initiated during that same period has not improved skepticism and stigmatization of sexual harassment and assault survivors who seek justice.

On the other hand, a positive finding from this work documents that most California adults, women and men, accurately recognize that access to abortion is important for women's health (8). Nonetheless, 30% of women and 39% of men were either unclear or undecided on this point, suggesting that there is still room for improvement on this indicator.

Overall, findings highlight the need to prioritize support for normative shifts in California regarding women's equality, credibility, and value. At the same time, the high level of neutral responses indicates that many people are not firmly set in their views. This "movable middle" represents a critical opportunity for engagement.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

• ***Invest in public education and narrative change.*** High neutrality and persistent skepticism — particularly around sexual violence—highlight the need for clear, evidence-based communication regarding the equal capacities of women using trusted, local voices. Focus on engagement of men as allies and supporters is important.

• ***Strengthen prevention and response to sexual harassment and violence.*** Given widespread doubt about survivor credibility, systems must reinforce survivor protections, reporting systems, and prevention efforts, independent of public opinion.

· ***Expand pathways to women's leadership.*** Persistent gaps in support for women's leadership point to the need for intentional recruitment, leadership development, and institutional accountability to increase representation. Efforts should also afford female leaders in business and politics additional protection in anticipation of potential backlash.

• ***Center health evidence in reproductive policy discussions.*** With divided views on abortion, efforts should emphasize medical and public health evidence to inform public understanding and policy decisions.

• ***Engage the "movable middle."*** With close to one-third of respondents neutral across many issues, targeted strategies can shift attitudes through credible information and community engagement.

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