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Liberal and Conservative Women Have Very Different Views About Marital Infidelity

by Daniel Cox, @DCOXPOLLS

Highlights

- 70% of women say that it is “always” morally wrong when a man has an extramarital affair, but fewer (56%) say the same when it is a woman who has an affair.
- Only 36% of liberal women say it is always wrong for a woman to engage in an extramarital affair, vs. 71% of conservative women who say the same.
- When judging women who engage in extramarital affairs, liberal women are far more willing than conservative women to withhold judgment.

Few behaviors seem to provoke near-universal condemnation more than marital infidelity. Even as Americans have become more accepting of premarital sex, teenage sex, and sex between people of the same gender, there is a near consensus that marital infidelity is wrong. A 2022 Gallup survey found that nearly 9 in 10 Americans believe marital infidelity is morally wrong; it elicits more consistent moral disapprobation than any of the 19 personal behaviors probed in the survey. However, a new survey conducted by the Survey Center on American Life suggests that public judgments about the morality of infidelity are not quite so simple. This survey reveals a startling double standard in views about the morality of marital infidelity when committed by a man or woman.

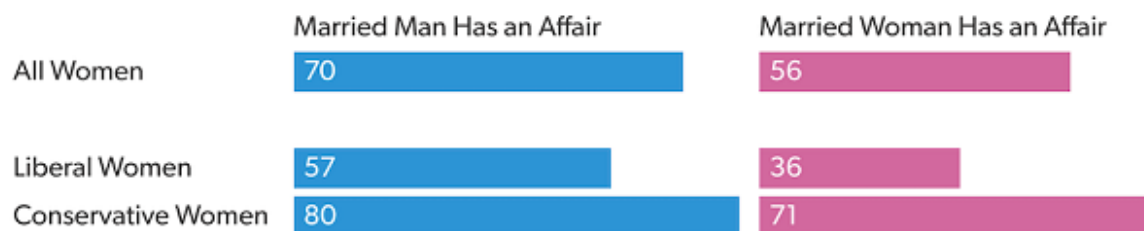
Previous surveys that asked Americans to weigh the morality of certain behaviors either did not specify the gender of the subject in the question or, as is the case with Gallup's question, mentioned both men and women. We developed a novel approach that asked respondents to respond to a question that explicitly references gender. As we explain in our report, "half of the sample were asked to judge the morality of these behaviors when a man engaged and an identical number of respondents when a woman committed these acts."

It turns out that Americans react to infidelity differently for men and women. The gap is particularly large among women: 70% of women say that it is "always" morally wrong when a man has an extramarital affair, but fewer (56%) say the same when it is a woman who has an affair. (Nearly 1 in 4 women say it is morally wrong "most of the time.")

This moral double standard varies among women from different backgrounds, but the gap is particularly large among liberal women. Only 36% of liberal women say it is always wrong for a woman to engage in an extramarital affair, while 57% say the same for men. Conservative women, by contrast, are somewhat less likely to judge men and women differently for committing infidelity—71% say it is always wrong for a woman to engage in an extramarital affair.

Liberal Women Less Likely to Say it is "Always Wrong" When a Married Woman Has an Affair

Percentage of women who believe it is "always wrong" when a ...



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults [N = 5,049].
Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2022

Why is the gender gap so pronounced among liberal women? Part of the reason liberal women are less inclined to believe infidelity is always wrong may lie in their distinct backgrounds and experiences. Liberals are far less religious than conservatives, meaning their views on morality are less rooted in a particular theology or religious belief system. Most religious traditions offer

unambiguous messages about the ethics of romantic engagements outside of marriage. Additionally, research has shown that liberals and conservatives “display different profiles of moral concerns, with liberals placing a greater emphasis on moral relativism.”

Another explanation may have to do with the concept of gender-linked fate. Most liberal women believe that what happens to other women in the US impacts their own lives. More than 7 in 10 (71%) embrace this idea. Less than 1 in 3 (30%) conservative women, by contrast, express such strong feelings of gender solidarity. If liberal women empathize strongly with the experiences of other women, they may feel less comfortable judging their decisions, or at the very least hesitant to express universal condemnation.

Finally, that both men and women appear to apply different moral standards for infidelity suggests that there is a cultural component as well. It may reflect the shared understanding of the reasons why men and women have extramarital affairs. Research has shown that women are more likely to commit infidelity because they are unhappy with their relationships, while men do so simply because they were presented with the opportunity. So, Americans may believe women have a more defensible reason for committing infidelity than men.

Relationships are complicated, and the bounds of societally accepted behavior within them has expanded. Still, Americans overwhelmingly believe marital infidelity is wrong, and most reject the existence of any extenuating circumstances. However, when judging women who engage in extramarital affairs, liberal women are far more willing than conservative women to withhold judgment.

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