



Cleveland Museum of Natural History Research Develops New Tool to Explore How Household Gender Inequality May Affect Health

New study with New Mexico State University examines connections among household roles, expectations, stress, and gendered health disparities

CLEVELAND, OH—September 17, 2026—Researchers from the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and New Mexico State University have partnered to investigate an often-overlooked influence on health: what happens inside the home.

The Museum's Senior Director of Curatorial and Research Affairs, Dr. Nicole Burt, and Dr. Kathryn Olszowy of New Mexico State University have developed a new research instrument designed to examine how household roles, expectations, and psychosocial stress may contribute to differences in health between women and men. The project's initial results, "[Creating a Household Gender Inequality Instrument for Investigating Gendered Health Disparities in the US: A Work in Progress](#)," was recently published in *Practicing Anthropology*.

Women and men experience different rates of a number of stress-related health conditions, but biological differences alone do not necessarily explain those disparities. Drs. Burt and Olszowy are investigating whether gendered expectations and experiences within households—including who performs physical work, manages schedules, carries emotional responsibilities, or prioritizes a partner's needs—may create psychosocial stress that ultimately influences health.

To help researchers study those relationships systematically, Drs. Burt and Olszowy argue that a household gender inequality, or HGI, scale is needed to advance research into stress-based gendered disparities in health. Building on existing HGI scales developed for international populations, the



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researchers created an instrument tailored specifically to U.S. households and cultural expectations. Their 37-question HGI instrument examines nine areas of household experience: gender ideology, mutualism, financial resources, time allocation, recognition, emotional labor, cognitive labor, physical labor, and communication. It also considers three environmental factors—overall household satisfaction, domestic abuse, and health—to provide a broader picture of how household dynamics may contribute to psychosocial stress and, ultimately, health outcomes.

Importantly, the tool is not designed to prescribe which partner should perform particular household responsibilities. Instead, it examines whether a person's expectations about household roles align with what actually happens in the home. The researchers propose that a mismatch between preferred and actual responsibilities may be an important source of stress, while arrangements that match a person's expectations may lessen that stress—even when the division of labor itself is not equal.

“Health recommendations often focus on the individual. However, the majority of adults are weighing decisions about their diet based not only on the health needs, but their household situation including the needs of their partners and children.

The researchers tested the approach with a preliminary sample of 36 women cohabiting with a romantic partner identified as a man in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Participants completed the new household measures along with established assessments of psychological distress and diet. The early results showed relationships between psychological distress and several dimensions of household gender inequality. Because the study is a pilot from a continuing project, the findings do not establish that household inequality causes particular health outcomes. Instead, the research demonstrates how the new instrument can be combined with measures of psychological distress, diet, and biological indicators to investigate pathways through which social experiences may influence health.

The researchers see potential applications extending beyond academic research. With additional testing and development, the instrument could help researchers and practitioners examine social determinants of health in public health, clinical care, behavioral health, and social work settings. The team plans to continue developing the instrument using larger and more diverse U.S. samples that include both women and men.

About the Cleveland Museum of Natural History

The Cleveland Museum of Natural History illuminates the world around us and inspires visitors to engage with the natural forces that shape their lives. Since its founding in 1920, the Museum has pioneered scientific research to advance knowledge across diverse fields of study and used its



outstanding collections, which encompass millions of artifacts and specimens, to deepen the public's understanding of the dynamic connections between humans and nature. Through its Natural Areas Program, the Museum stewards more than 12,500 acres of protected ecosystems across northern Ohio. A community gathering place, educational center, and research institution, the Museum is a vital resource that serves Cleveland and the nation. For more information, visit CMNH.org.

Media Contact

Samantha Guenther

Assistant Director of Marketing & Media Relations

Cleveland Museum of Natural History

Office: 216.231.4600 x3432

Mobile: 440.429.2902

sguenther@cmnh.org

