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Study: Hurricanes with female names taken less seriously

-, 03.06.2014, 19:00 Time

USPA News - People tend to take hurricanes with feminine names less seriously than those with masculine names, apparently because storms with feminine names are perceived as less threatening, causing female-named storms to be more deadly, according to a new study. Researchers at the University of Illinois, who examined more than six decades of death rates from hurricanes that affected the United States, found that severe storms with more feminine names resulted in significantly higher death tolls.

Participants in a study also reaffirmed the findings of a gender bias. According to the researchers, people tend to perceive a storm with a feminine name as less foreboding than ones with a more masculine name. As a result of these incorrect perceptions, people in the path of severe storms with feminine names may take fewer protective measures, leaving them more vulnerable to harm. "The problem is that a hurricane's name has nothing to do with its severity," said Kiju Jung, a University of Illinois student who lead the study. "Names are assigned arbitrarily, based on a predetermined list of alternating male and female names. If people in the path of a severe storm are judging the risk based on the storm's name, then this is potentially very dangerous." The results of the study, which showed that a typical hurricane with a feminine name can be up to three times as deadly, were published in the official journal of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The results may have important implications for policymakers, meteorologists and the news media regarding hurricane communication and preparedness. "In judging the intensity of a storm, people appear to be applying their beliefs about how men and women behave," said Sharon Shavitt, a professor of marketing at the University of Illinois and a co-author of the report. "This makes a female-named hurricane, especially one with a very feminine name such as Belle or Cindy, seem gentler and less violent." When the researchers asked people about their perception of specific storm scenarios, the test subjects rated hurricanes with names such as Alexandra, Christina, and Victoria as less risky and intense when compared to hurricanes with masculine names such as Alexander, Christopher, and Victor. "People imagining a 'female' hurricane were not as willing to seek shelter," Shavitt said. "The stereotypes that underlie these judgments are subtle and not necessarily hostile toward women - they may involve viewing women as warmer and less aggressive than men." Madhu Viswanathan, a professor of marketing at the University of Illinois and a co-author of the study, said gender biases such as the one seen in the study are pervasive and implicit. "We found that people were affected by the gender of hurricane names regardless of whether they explicitly endorsed the idea that women and men have different traits. This appears to be a widespread phenomenon," Viswanathan said. The annual list of hurricane names for the Atlantic and Pacific basins is determined by the hurricane committee of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Only feminine names were used prior to the late 1970s, but protests by feminists prompted the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to introduce male names.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-2276/study-hurricanes-with-female-names-taken-less-seriously.html>

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619