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# Labor Force Participation Among Utah Women

**Susan R. Madsen, Robbyn T. Scribner / Utah Valley University**

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## Labor Force Participation Among Utah Women

Over the past half-century or so, Utah women's participation in the labor force has steadily increased at a rate of about 8% per decade (Utah Women & Leadership Project, 2019). According to the most recent (2017) U.S. Census Bureau estimates, women in Utah make up 45% of the state workforce, which is slightly lower than the U.S. women's share of the national workforce, 47.8% (United States Census Bureau, 2017a). In general, Utah women are about as likely to be employed as U.S. women, but Utah women are less likely to work full-time year-round (Department of Workforce Services, 2014). Numerous factors influence Utah women's experiences in the labor force, including such barriers to successful employment such as trouble accessing affordable childcare and occupational segregation in lower-paying industries. Since solid employment is a key aspect of financial health, as well as a contributor to intellectual and social well-being, understanding labor force issues is critical. This research snapshot focuses on three key areas:

1. An overview of Utah women's labor force participation, broken down by demographics,
2. An exploration of the industries and occupations in which Utah women are most likely to work, and
3. A discussion of ways to increase Utah women's success in the labor force.

## Demographics

A recent American Community Survey estimates that for people ages 16–65, 74.0% of Utah women worked during the previous 12 months, a slightly higher rate as compared to U.S. women (72.7%) (United States Census Bureau, 2017a). Estimates for the same time period give different numbers for the specific category of Utah women “in the labor force,” which includes those who are unemployed but looking for work, though with those data as well Utah women's rates are higher than the national average (60.9% vs. 58.3%) (United States Census Bureau, 2017b). However, Utah women were less likely than U.S. women to work full-time, year-round: 36.7% vs. 43.5%. Utah women are also considerably less likely to work than Utah men: 87.9% of Utah men had worked in the previous 12 months, and 62.6% of them had worked full-time, year-round (United States Census Bureau, 2017a). A recent report ranked Utah first in the nation for the percentage of employed women who worked part-time (40.2% vs. the national average of 29.4%) (Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), 2013).

Various factors play a role in determining Utah women's likelihood to participate in the labor force. For example, age significantly impacts women's employment rates. In both the United States and Utah, younger women are very likely to be in the labor force. According to 2017 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, Utah women participate in the labor

force at a higher rate than the national average in their late teens and early 20s. Beginning at age 25, however, the national average for women's labor force participation becomes higher than Utah women's participation rate and remains higher through age 59. Utah women's labor force par-

ticipation drops considerably below the national average from ages 25–45, the years when many women are having children. After age 45 the labor force participation rate for Utah women jumps up to levels near the national average. See Table 1 for more detail (United State Census Data, 2017c).

**Table 1: Percentage of Women in the Labor Force by Age**

| Age   | U.S. Women | Utah Women |
|-------|------------|------------|
| 16–19 | 38.9%      | 51.1%      |
| 20–21 | 68.1%      | 78.5%      |
| 22–24 | 77.0%      | 79.7%      |
| 25–29 | 78.3%      | 72.1%      |
| 30–34 | 76.4%      | 65.5%      |
| 35–44 | 76.2%      | 69.3%      |
| 45–54 | 75.3%      | 74.6%      |
| 55–59 | 67.4%      | 66.9%      |
| 60–61 | 58.1%      | 59.4%      |
| 62–64 | 46.1%      | 46.4%      |
| 65–69 | 27.5%      | 26.2%      |

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.*

Marital status is another telling factor when it comes to Utah women's employment. Married women in the state are less likely to be in the labor force than married women in the national average, but Utah women who are not currently married are more likely to be in the labor force than the average U.S. woman. Specific labor force participation rates are as follows: 57.1% of Utah married women (vs. 59.4% U.S.), 70.5% of Utah women who have never been married (vs. 66.5% U.S.), 72.7% of Utah women who are separated (vs. 66.2% U.S.), 67.8% of Utah women who are divorced (vs. 63.3% U.S.), and 21.2% of Utah women who are widowed (vs. 18.2% U.S.) (United States Census Bureau, 2017d).

Utah women's labor force participation also varies by ethnicity: a recent report showed that 65.5% of Black women, 64.5% of Hispanic women, 64.6% of women who identified as "other" or two or more races, 60.7% of Asian women, 58.5% of White women, and 54.5% of Native American

women are in the labor force (IWPR, 2018).

Although a majority of Utah mothers do participate in the labor force, Utah mothers of young children are less likely to be employed than U.S. mothers. 2012 U.S. Census Bureau estimates show that 61% of Utah mothers with children under age 6 work (vs. 70% U.S.), 51% of Utah mothers with children under age 6 and children ages 6–17 work (vs. 64% U.S.), 73% of Utah mothers whose children are all between the ages of 6–17 work (vs. 77% U.S.), and 76% percent of Utah mothers with no children under age 18 work (this is higher than the national average of 73%) (Langston, 2014). Utah ranks last in the nation for children with both parents in the labor force: 52%, well below the national average of 65% (Langston, 2014). Utah also has the largest gap in the nation between fathers' and mothers' participation in the labor force, at 42.7% (IWPR, 2015b).

Women's labor force participation rates also vary somewhat according to where they live in Utah. A recent report stated that the counties with the highest female labor force participation are Summit (65.3%), Salt Lake (64.8%), Grand (64.7%), and Beaver (62.9%); the counties with the lowest rates are Washington (49.8%), Duchesne (49.3%), Piute (49.0%), and Daggett (45.0%) (Langston, 2014).

### Occupational Segregation

One key aspect of understanding the female labor force in Utah is occupational segregation—the phenomenon of women holding a high percentage of jobs in certain industries as well as specific positions within those industries. Utah Department of Workforce Services Economist Lecia Langston has noted that large-scale occupational changes by gender were slow in coming. Specifically, she has observed that “detailed occupations where Utah women comprise at least 90 percent of employment include several healthcare-related occupations: occupational therapy assistants, medical transcriptionists, dental hygienists, dental assistants, dietitians/nutritionists and medical assistants. Utah females also account for more than 90 percent of employment in two occupations which relate to the care of younger children—preschool/kindergarten teachers and childcare workers. Other occupations showing 90-percent or more female employment include cosmetologists, other personal care workers, teacher assistants, tailors, billing clerks and proofreaders. This roster closely mirrors the 2000 Census list of occupations with 90-percent or greater female employment” (Langston, 2014a).

Utah women still make up a high percentage of all workers in certain occupations, many of which require relatively lower skills and receive lower pay. According to 2017 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, the three areas in which Utah women are mostly highly segregated are healthcare support occupations (79.3% of workers are women), personal care and service occupations (78.7%), and health technologists and technicians (75.4%) (United States Census Bureau, 2017e). The median incomes for all workers in these three occupational areas are, respectively, as

follows: \$21,703, \$12,369, and \$27,499. The median income for each of these three female-dominated professions is below average for all professions in the state (\$32,986) (United States Census Bureau, 2017f). In contrast, the occupations in which the lowest percentage of jobs are held by women are construction and extraction occupations (2.2%); installation, maintenance, and repair occupations (2.3%); and law enforcement workers including supervisors (11.7%) (United State Census Bureau, 2017e). The median earnings for all workers in these three male-dominated occupational areas are, respectively, as follows: \$36,259, \$44,131, and \$52,521, all above the median income for all professions in the state (United States Census Bureau, 2017f).

Not only do Utah women make up high percentages of workers in certain occupations, but a large number of all Utah working women are segregated in a few specific (and lower-paying) jobs. More than 40% of Utah women work in just two occupational groups: office and administrative support, where 24.0% of employed Utah women work; and service occupations, where 18.8% of them work (Hess & Williams, 2014). Both of these groups of jobs have median wages below the state average (United States Census Bureau, 2017f). Utah men, on the other hand, are more likely than Utah women to be concentrated in higher-paying industries and job types (Hess & Williams, 2014).

### Increasing Utah Women's Employment Success

Public entities, corporations, and individual women can make efforts to increase women's success in the Utah labor force. Working women in the state face various challenges; for example, parents may have difficulty finding quality childcare, which is cost-prohibitive for many families in Utah, as it is in the rest of the nation (Economic Policy Institute, 2016). This dilemma is amplified in Utah, as we tend to have more children than the national average (Hard @ Work, 2014). Interestingly, a recent study ranked Utah 50th in the country in its “Childcare Index,” which ordered states by the relative costs of infant care, the proportion of four-year-olds in publicly funded Pre-K programs, and the policies in

place to promote quality Pre-K care (IWPR, 2019). Another barrier specific to low-income women's employment success is the "cliff effect," wherein women who have been receiving public benefits risk losing this support as they become eligible for promotions or raises at work, and the loss of public benefits occurs faster than rising incomes replace their value (The Women's Foundation of Colorado, n.d.). Various groups and policy makers are working to address these types of issues legislatively.

Utahns could also benefit from increased support for women entrepreneurs. Census estimates from 2012 show only 30.3% of firms in Utah are owned by women (compared to 35.8% nationally), and sales by women-owned businesses in Utah make up only a very small share of total sales by all firms (United States Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d.; Langston Hard @ Work).

Corporations in the state can also do much to improve employment success for women who choose to or need to work. For example, the Women's Leadership Institute has invited companies statewide (both public and private) to participate in the ElevateHER Challenge, which has among its stated goals to increase the percentage of women in senior leadership positions and on boards, to retain women at all organizational levels, and to close gender pay gaps (<https://wliut.com/elevate-her-challenge/>). In addition, all organizations in the state would do well to reevaluate their systems and processes regarding employee recruitment,

hiring, development, and promotion to ensure they have diverse and inclusive work environments that offer flexibility and maximum potential for employee success. Finally, individual Utah women, schools, universities, and other stakeholders can work to close the education gap between genders in the state. Utah women are less likely than U.S. women to work in jobs that require higher education. As more women in Utah earn at least bachelor's degrees, specifically in high-paying, growth industries, they will have more choices and opportunities for successful employment (Department of Workforce Services, 2014). Additionally, some women might benefit from exploring training and certification in fields that are traditionally male-dominated yet may lead to careers that are relatively high-paying and flexible.

Women in Utah make up a significant proportion of the overall labor force in the state, but many are employed in low-paying jobs that have limited room for advancement. For many Utah women, the majority of whom work for pay, training for and securing successful employment can be crucial in order to ensure financial health; solid employment also affects other aspects related to overall quality of life. Finding ways to improve various factors for Utah women in the labor force will not only better their lives but also strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and the state as a whole.

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