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Women Leaders in Utah Government—Their Paths to Power

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Women Leaders in Utah Government – Their Paths to Power

Setting the Stage

When both men and women work together in leadership roles, organizations thrive. This holds true for government—and democratic governance processes in general—and it supports the call to reflect gender diversity at all levels. Yet, typical conversations about women in government often focus on the need for women to run for elected office. While this is certainly important, little if no attention has been given to the lack of women leaders within the halls of government. In response to this, Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) researchers recently conducted pioneering research resulting in three research briefs that, for the first time, identified the number of women in leadership positions within Utah’s state, county, and municipal organizations.¹ However, the numbers and statistics alone do not tell the whole story.

It is equally important to understand women’s experiences as they advance in government organizations. Although women comprise half of the government’s workforce, and rules and regulations have been legislated to reduce bias, research has found that women continue to experience barriers, challenges, and prejudice that impact their leadership paths. While the bias may be less overt, the cumulative impact of even subtle discrimination affects the career progression experiences for women and can influence their willingness to even approach possible leadership opportunities.² Clearly, each woman’s career experience is unique; however, there is value in hearing and learning from women’s own words the ways they experience advancement to leadership.³

The research findings can benefit both individuals and organizations. For individuals, understanding women’s career progression experiences provides useful insight for other women who aspire to lead, as it creates a more realistic understanding of what to expect while navigating one’s own professional situation. Within organizations, government agencies and supervisors can learn which leadership development strategies are most effective, what barriers exist, and how to best support efforts to attract and retain qualified women leaders.

Study Background

To support this research, the UWLP research team collected data during May and June of 2020. Participants were initially recruited statewide by using direct emails to women who currently hold leadership positions in a Utah municipality, county, state, or special district government organization. Organizations that work directly with government agencies (Utah League of Cities and Towns, Utah Association of Counties, Utah Association of City Managers) also assisted in distributing the survey information to their membership.

Data were collected through an online survey designed to capture participants’ career progression and advancement experiences. The survey asked participants to provide basic demographic information, to rate a series of statements on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, and to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies or initiatives do you feel have supported your professional development and advancement?
2. Please share one or more experience that was pivotal to your career progression.
3. Describe any challenges you faced during your leadership advancement.
4. What advice do you have for government organizations or supervisors within government organizations to support the advancement of women to leadership roles?

Although not every participant responded to every question, 435 women completed the demographic questions and rated the statements that highlighted their own perceptions. All data from the open-ended questions were carefully analyzed and coded, with only select highlights included in this research and policy brief.

Participant Demographics

The demographics for the 435 women who responded are summarized below (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<i>Age:</i> 20–29 years old (3.9%), 30–39, (22.3%), 40–49 (36.3%), 50–59 (26.7%), 60–69 (10.1%), 70+ (0.7%)
<i>Marital Status:</i> married/life partner (73.0%), separated/divorced (13.1%), single (12.2%), widowed (1.6%)
<i>Highest Educational Level:</i> high school diploma (9.4%), some college (11.5%), associate degree (9.9%), bachelor’s degree (30.6%), master’s degree (33.3%), doctorate degree (5.3%)
<i>Race:</i> White (90.1%), Hispanic/Latina (5.1%), 2 or more races (1.4%), Asian (1.2%), Black (0.9%), American Indian (0.5%); Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.5%), Other (0.5%)
<i>Leadership Role:</i> supervisor (38.1%), manager (24.4%), assistant manager (23.3%), associate director (9.1%), director (5.1%)
<i>Level of Government:</i> state (56.6%), county (24.8%), municipality (16.8%), special district (1.8%)
<i>Position Classification:</i> merit (77.8%), appointed (22.2%)
<i>Years in Government:</i> less than 5 years (17.7%), 6–10 (17.2%), 11–15 (16.6%), 16–20 (18.2%), 20+ (30.3%)

Perceptions of Advancement Experiences

To provide additional insight into leadership advancement experiences, participants were asked to identify their agreement or disagreement with nine statements. There were 424 respondents who shared their perceptions using a 7-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree) to answer the following questions.

Table 2: Leadership Advancement Experiences

Questions	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
1. I have access to someone within the organization I can turn to for advice.	5.80	1.64
2. I have a mentor/sponsor who supports my advancement.	4.91	2.02
3. I have experienced bias (subtle or overt) that I feel is due to my gender.	4.43	2.13
4. I felt adequately prepared for my current leadership role.	5.39	1.47
5. My ideas and contributions are listened to and implemented.	5.15	1.55
6. I feel government organizations within Utah are generally supportive of women being leaders.	4.51	1.69
7. Formal leadership development is important to my organization.	4.83	1.69
8. My organization's policies and practices support women advancing into leadership positions.	4.90	1.67
9. I feel that men in my organization support the advancement of women.	4.70	1.75

Most participants felt they had someone within the organizations they could turn to for advice (Q1), and many felt they had a mentor or sponsor who supported their advancement (Q2). However, many participants answered most questions only between neutral and somewhat agree. More advanced statistics revealed that older women did feel more prepared for their roles (Q4). We also found that women who worked in a municipality who had more education and held a more senior role felt that their ideas and contributions were listened to and implemented (Q5). When it came to whether government organizations supported women leaders (Q6), there was a significant difference between women who worked for the state versus municipalities, with women working for the state rating higher. It was no surprise that women with more education who were serving in higher leadership roles spotted more bias around them (Q3), felt more listened to (Q5), and believed that leadership development (Q7) was less important to the organization. Finally, those who felt men were less supportive (Q9) were the same individuals who had personally experienced bias (subtle or overt) due to their gender (Q3).

Behaviors and Strategies

There were 245 participants who responded to the open-ended question about what behaviors or strategies they experienced

that supported their professional development and advancement. Analysis of their answers resulted in three over-arching categories: personal strategies, organizational strategies, and networks of support.

1. **Personal Strategies:** Interestingly, 95% (232) of the participants who responded to the question about behaviors or strategies shared intentional actions they took to support their own advancement. Women frequently mentioned they would “take a risk,” “take a chance,” or “took a leap,” while others shared they were on their own. One woman explained, “Most of my professional development and advancement has been self-guided. I have no formal mentorship within my organization.”

There were 131 women (53%) who discussed the value of having opportunities to learn, to gain experience, or to prove oneself. Women shared the importance of being able to be in the room where decisions are made and having opportunities to establish credibility. The next most frequently mentioned **Personal Strategy** was the value of an advanced education, which was mentioned by 69 participants (28%). One participant noted that “having a master’s degree provided me a seat at the table.” Another woman shared, “I successfully put myself through graduate school. I was a full-time employee, full-time student, and single mom. I had a great support system of family and friends who made this possible for me by providing care for my son while I attended class and provided wonderful study group opportunities where the kids could play together at the same time. Statistically speaking, the chances of me being able to do this myself are very slim.” Another woman shared, “I once had a director have a candid conversation with me about how far I would go with an education vs. no education within our entity.”

Fifty-five participants (22%) specifically mentioned being willing to work hard (work ethic) or volunteer for assignments. One participant wrote, “Saying yes has opened a lot of doors for me.” In addition, 41 (17%) shared the importance of self-confidence, while 39 (16%) mentioned the value of having strong interpersonal skills or being a team player. One participant stated, “Having a co-worker admit to me that she too sometimes struggled with feeling competent (after about a year in a manager role) was a *huge* turning point for me. Knowing that others might make it all look easy but have struggles, just as I did, allowed me to move forward, trust myself, and seek out the information and techniques I needed.” Another woman shared her struggle with confidence: “My challenges in leadership advancement have been my own insecurities, when I haven’t felt that I knew enough or was ready for the next step, mentors and peers encouraged me to try and helped me prepare.”

Thirty-seven participants (15%) cited connecting with women leaders as supporting their advancement, with one

participant sharing, “[An] opportunity I had was working with two other women leaders who included me in projects, travel, and discussions relating to their programs. I had exposure to experiences that many did not because they were open to having the new person tag along to meetings and experience things usually reserved for higher level management.” Additionally, there were 25 women (10%) who mentioned applying for promotions, and 24 participants (10%) who identified the importance of learning about or better understanding the organization.

2. **Organizational Strategies:** At 72% (176 participants), the second over-arching category under *Behaviors and Strategies* was Organizational Strategies. Participants acknowledged intentional actions taken by organizations that contributed to their advancement, including an overall organizational culture that supported women. Highlighted by 97 participants (40%), the most frequently mentioned strategy was training or professional development, which emphasized the importance of funding for training. There were 43 participants (18%) who mentioned the value of formal leadership development, with three specific programs being most frequently mentioned: the State of Utah’s Certified Public Manager (CPM) program, Salt Lake County’s Women’s Leadership Forum, and the Leadership Academy. One participant shared, “Attending Salt Lake County’s Women’s Leadership Forum helped me see where I wanted to go and how to form my own path to get there. The knowledge and activities were structured around self-awareness and self-activation, getting me to actually jump and make the move I wanted to.” Another woman wrote, “The biggest thing I got from this experience was a sense of permission—that I can be a leader and I don’t need to wait for others’ approval before stepping forward.” Also, 25 participants (10%) noted the value of participating in conferences, in-house events, and local trainings.

Finally, respondents identified two more Organizational Strategies: 21 (9%) mentioned flexible scheduling, which supports work/life balance, and 19 women (8%) identified tuition assistance. One woman pointed out that “access to tuition reimbursement was key to completing my MPA.”

3. **Networks of Support:** The final broad category emerged from participants’ identifying people to whom they could turn for encouragement or advice. Of the 245 responses, 175 (71%) indicated they had someone who supported them; 65 (27%) specifically mentioned receiving support from their supervisor; and 34 (14%) claimed support from “others,” including female colleagues, family members, or individuals outside the organization. One woman stated, “[Support] has not been from within my organization. It has been from my external partnerships, colleagues, and collective community. As a woman of color there are no formal strategies or initiatives within my organization for professional development or advancement. I’ve had to

create those initiatives on my own and have sought out my own external strategies.”

Another key element found within Networks of Support came from women in leadership roles within their organizations, which was mentioned by 30 participants (12%). Although the women leaders were often more distant from the respondent, simply being in leadership and reaching out occasionally provided perceived support to the advance of the participant. One woman wrote, “I often hear from other women in the organization that seeing women leading means so much to them and gives them hope.” Thirty participants (12%) also mentioned the importance of having support from top leadership, while 17 individuals (7%) mentioned receiving support from participation in professional organizations. Respondents also made the connection between what their current administration’s attitude was on promoting women and how women in the organization were treated. They knew that the attitude of top leadership mattered.

Pivotal Experiences

There were 260 women who responded to the open-ended question asking them to share experiences that they considered to be pivotal to their leadership development. The following themes emerged and are presented in the order in which they were most frequently mentioned:

1. **Mentors, Role Models, and Coaches:** Most women, 101 participants (39%), highlighted the importance of having a mentor, role model, or coach. While some participants experienced the lack of mentoring opportunities, others encouraged women to mentor each other. This aligns with research that acknowledges that an important element of social networking at work is mentoring.⁴ Studies have confirmed that “women have to overcome greater barriers when acquiring a mentor than do men”⁵ and that most mentoring opportunities occur between same-sex mentors.⁶ Research has shown that because significantly fewer women hold leadership positions, it is more difficult for women to establish mentors⁷ and that “if mentors continue to choose protégés who share similar characteristics and aspirations, this may pose greater challenges for women.”⁸ The combined impact is that women perceive a lack of workplace support and experience isolation in their positions.⁹
2. **Significant Projects or Assignments:** The next most common pivotal experience was being given a significant project or assignment, as noted by 49 participants (19%). The tasks included involvement in working committees, workgroups, meetings, task forces, or interim assignments. The idea was that women viewed a significant project as an opportunity to learn and gain experience. One participant likened it to “being invited to the table.”
3. **New Job Opportunities and Visibility:** Having a new job opportunity was something that 39 participants (15%)

identified as being a pivotal experience in their leadership development, and 28 women (11%) mentioned the value of having visibility or exposure to leadership. One participant shared her perspective on the importance of “making a good impression on those men who have the influence to refer you for higher positions [then] finding those with the most influence to make that happen.”

4. **Encouragement and Others Listening:** Two final items mentioned as being pivotal to the participant’s advancement included being encouraged to apply for a position, which was listed by 22 participants (8%), and feeling that they were being listened to or were accepted, which was mentioned by 19 participants (7%). Some likened being listened to as simply being acknowledged or respected. One participant shared the value of “having the opportunity to be in the room when important decisions were being made by other government leaders [and] feeling like I was recognized as an expert for a particular issue, and that people listened to me.” Another felt that a pivotal experience was “being invited into senior leadership and provided opportunities to work with the leaders of the organization.”

Leadership Advancement Challenges

When asked what challenges they had experienced during their leadership advancement, 271 participants shared their experiences, and the following themes emerged:

1. **Biased Attitudes:** More than half (52%) of the survey participants (142 women) who answered this question cited the challenge of navigating the biased attitudes of others. Unfortunately, several women mentioned elected officials as the main source of bias. In this category, 73 women (27%) went on to share their perspective that men in the organization received preferential treatment, often expressing frustration with the “good ol’ boys club.” One participant shared, “I was told to step back and quit meeting/mentoring with this group of women, even on my own time, because it was causing concern for a group of men who felt the women were getting an extra advantage.” Another expressed her frustration with “being shut out of discussions and/or advancement because my peer (a man) had a family to provide for.”

Twenty-seven women (10%) specifically called out religious or Utah cultural bias against women being leaders. One woman stated, “In...government specifically there are subtle discriminations against women and those not a part of the Mormon church. There is a network of church participation and men’s golf leagues that foster relationship building and networking that some of us cannot be a part of.” Another woman wrote, “Utah is a patriarchal society. Men make most of the decisions. The good ol’ boys club is alive and real. Women are not invited into

that club.” A final bias-related challenge was age bias, which was identified by 19 participants (7%).

These findings align with previous research focused on Utah that has shown how the state’s socially conservative culture impacts gender-based expectations and influences the experiences of Utah women.¹⁰ As a result, the social roles women are expected to adhere to can directly impact their career progression experiences. Some women who choose to pursue leadership opportunities in Utah believe that they do so despite the social and cultural norms that discourage them.

2. **Lack of Organizational Support:** There were 99 women (37%) who pointed to an overall lack of organizational support, often feeling that they were on their own. Twenty-five (9%) expanded on this by explaining they felt they had no opportunities to advance, a challenge particularly relevant for those working in the rural parts of the state. Twenty-five women (9%) expressed challenges that involved other women not being supportive, and 25 women (9%) specifically mentioned a lack of support from their supervisor.
3. **Stifled Voices:** Seventy-five women (28%) shared their frustrations with not being listened to and being shut down, ignored, talked over, dismissed, discounted, and condescended to. They felt that this led to difficulty in being heard and/or that their contributions were being minimized. One participant wrote, “They don’t listen to a thing a woman says.” In addition, some expressed frustration that others take credit for their ideas or work, as well as having their passion for a topic being labeled as “emotional” or “bitchy.” In fact, some believed it was counterproductive to encourage women to speak up because of these continued barriers and challenges.
4. **Pay Equity and Caregiver Responsibilities:** Forty-nine women (18%) shared challenges concerning pay, including difficulty in negotiating pay or the lack of pay equity with male colleagues. There were also 40 women (15%) who described the weight of unpaid care work and the difficulty of juggling caregiver responsibilities. As one woman stated, “Trying to parent while meeting the demands in a leadership position is soul crushing at times.”
5. **Hiring and Interview Processes:** Many women (42 or 15%) mentioned challenges with the organization’s hiring process, with more than half of these women (22 participants) including additional comments on having difficulty navigating the interview process. One participant stated, “Great emphasis is placed on interviewing and this took me years to finetune. I was overlooked for several opportunities until I could get my interview just right. It was really discouraging, but I’m glad I persevered and kept trying.”

6. **Social Exclusion:** Finally, 21 participants (8%) called out the frustration of being socially excluded. One woman observed, “I swear there is still a stigma between a male coworker and a female coworker being behind a closed door, riding in a car together, going out to lunch together, etc. There are a lot of opportunities missed because no one wants the appearance to look like something unprofessional could be going on between a man and a woman working together. No one ever asks me to golf.”

This comment aligns with research finding that women experience the alienating effects of socially based norms, which reinforce the message they do not belong.¹¹ These encounters influence women’s cumulative experiences, which lead to the conclusion that their career opportunities are limited.¹² Perhaps because of these challenges, several respondents mentioned how useful it would be for them to have a safe place where they could share their experiences and identify positive ways to respond.

Advice for Government Leaders & Organizations

There were 253 women who shared ideas on how government leaders and organizations could better support the advancement of women.

1. **Intentionally Support Women:** Offering intentional support to women was the most frequently mentioned suggestion, which was given by 85 participants (34%). One wrote, “Don’t expect women to work harder than men to gain the same opportunities.” Another woman shared, “Make room for women to advance. Be supportive. Let us sit at the table and have a voice.”
2. **Provide Equal Access to Opportunities:** Gender should not be the determining factor when deciding developmental experiences or advancement. Forty-seven women (19%) emphasized that they just wanted equal access to opportunities. Participants often commented that they did not want—or expect—preferential treatment, just to be treated equally. One individual stated, “Treat women equally. It is important to make the staffing decisions based on the best candidate rather than their gender or if they participate in a certain religion. Treat everyone equally and provide opportunities for women to advance beyond administrative assistant positions.” Another participant stated, “Equality. Period. Women do not need nor deserve anything ‘extra.’ Just give us an absolute fair chance. And also, hold us accountable.”
3. **Embrace Inclusivity and Diversity:** Thirty-nine women (15%) encouraged organizations to embrace inclusivity and diversity, with an additional 32 participants (13%) calling out the need for organization-sponsored leadership development efforts, as well as diversity and unconscious bias training and development opportunities.
4. **Engage in Open Communication:** Open communication that includes active listening and honest feedback was mentioned by 32 women (13%). Eighteen women (7%)

encouraged supervisors to ask women about their career goals, suggesting they try to “be aware of the personal and professional goals for the women in your organization. Support them in the achievement of those goals.”

5. **Advocate for Yourself as Women:** Finally, there was a call for women to be proactive and advocate for themselves. Seventeen participants (7%) offered advice such as, “Do not be afraid to voice your opinion and stand up for yourself.” Another shared, “We need to be prepared and proactive. We need to take courage and do the things that make a difference. We need to promote ourselves better because often we are the only ones doing that for ourselves.” Words of advice were also offered by another participant: “Be true to yourself and don’t be afraid to put yourself out there. Be confident you are capable of being a great leader and an example to those around you.”

Recommendations

In addition to the suggestions identified under Advice, women also offered recommendations and ideas on how organizational supervisors, managers, and leaders could more effectively support women’s advancement. See Table 3 for a condensed list of recommendations.

Table 3: Summary of Recommendations to Support Women’s Advancement

Benefits: Establish family-friendly policies and practices, including childcare benefits, on-site childcare, flexible schedules, and part-time work; paid family leave; more telecommuting opportunities.
Experience: Provide opportunities for women to take the lead on projects and initiatives; create opportunities to move between departments or divisions to provide upward mobility; provide internal on-the-job training that could include acting-in opportunities, cross-training programs, job shadowing, and being a lead worker; identify opportunities for women to be mentored, particularly by those in higher management; give women opportunities to participate in decision-making and government business that supports their professional development.
Organizational Culture: Be aware of the work environment and build a culture of collaboration, inclusiveness, and diversity; be cognizant of microaggressions or biases, particularly in relation to practices, procedures, and job titles; provide organizational training on communication; commit to mirroring the population in organizational leadership; find ways to engage male colleagues to recognize and confront discrimination and bias.
Research: Look at possible reasons for low numbers of women in upper leadership, including travel restrictions, lack of women applying, and not feeling supported; survey men for their view on issues related to women advancing in the organization.

Training & Development: Support training at both local and national levels; provide professional development resources, including leadership development curriculum; be clear on the path for advancement, letting women know what skills and competencies are required and how to obtain them; support continuing education through funding/scholarships earmarked for women with optional childcare stipend.

Voice: Ask women their opinion and feedback, then support their ideas; ask about their career goals and how the supervisor and organization can support them; include women at the table and encourage their participation.

Women-Specific Support: Create opportunities to network and collaborate with other women in leadership to share their experiences safely; provide training and networking opportunities between women who work at city, county, and state governments; develop a structured women leadership program that includes women of color; share ways women have successfully advanced.

Conclusion

This brief explores the responses participants offered to questions about their leadership advancement experiences in government organizations. Several women emphasized how rewarding it was for them to work in government. Yet, it should be noted that over one-third (37%) of the overall participants chose not to provide responses to any of the questions. It may be that those women had very positive experiences that are not represented in this study.

That said, research at the national level has shown that women “view the path to advancement as more stressful, have lower career longevity and satisfaction, and receive less recognition compared to men.”¹³ In Utah, many women are faced with the discouraging reality that they will have fewer opportunities than their male counterparts to advance, and they will also receive less peer- and work-related support.¹⁴ Despite these challenges, the women working for Utah’s special districts, municipalities, counties, and state, showed considerable resilience and persistence while navigating challenges and frustrations, particularly in the face of persistent gender bias.

We extend a call to action for leaders and supervisors within Utah government agencies to learn from the experiences of the women reflected in this study. By intentionally incorporating some of the effective advancement strategies offered in this brief, leaders can provide a more inclusive leadership environment that considers a variety of experiences and perspectives. As our communities face increasing challenges, supporting the advancement of women can be a valuable tool for government leaders.

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² Hamidullah, M. F., Riccucci, N. M., & Pandey, S. K. (2015). Women in city hall: Gender dimensions of managerial values. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 45(3), 247–262.

³ Glass, C., & Cook, A. (2016). Women and top leadership positions: Towards an institutional analysis. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 21(1), 91–103.

⁴ Pheko, M. M. (2014). Batswana female managers’ career experiences and perspectives on corporate mobility and success. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 12(1), 1–11.

⁵ Ibid, p. 3.

⁶ Fox, R. L., & Schuhmann, R. A. (2001). Mentoring experiences of women city managers: Are women disadvantaged? *The American Review of Public Administration*, 31(4), 381–392.

⁷ Hoyt, C. L. (2012). Gender bias in employment contexts: A closer examination of the role incongruity principle. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(1), 86–96.

⁸ Fox, R. L., & Schuhmann, R. A. (2001), p. 390.

⁹ Glass, C., & Cook, A. (2016).

¹⁰ Madsen, S. R. (2015, February 23). Women, confidence, and leadership: What do Utah women leaders think? Utah Women & Leadership Project, Research & Policy Brief, No. 11. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/11-women-confidence-and-leadership.pdf>

¹¹ Kossek, E. E., Su, R., & Wu, L. (2017). “Opting out” or “pushed out”? Integrating perspectives on women’s career equality for gender inclusion and interventions. *Journal of Management*, 43(1), 228–254.

¹² Wynen, J., Op de Beeck, S., & Ruebens, S. (2015). The nexus between gender and perceived career opportunities: Evidence from the U. S. federal government. *Public Personnel Management*, 44(3), 375–400.

¹³ Kossek, E. E., Su, R., & Wu, L. (2017), p. 230.

¹⁴ Choi, S. (2011). Diversity and representation in the U.S. federal government: Analysis of the trends of federal employment. *Public Personnel Management*, 40(1), 25–46.

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