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The Status of Women Leadership in Government—State of Utah

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Research & Policy Brief

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The Status of Women Leaders in Government – State of Utah

Setting the Stage

Organizations increasingly thrive when both men and women hold leadership roles and work together. Gender inclusivity in leadership benefits not only Utah’s businesses, but also its government organizations, such as state legislatures, city councils, and state and local bureaucracies.¹ Recent events underscore the need for government—and democratic governance processes in general—to demand diversity at all levels.

American democracy is based on the concept of representation.² Governments mirror this idea by encouraging agencies to employ a workforce that shares the demographic characteristics of the community it serves.³ This is known as representative bureaucracy.⁴ It is based on the idea that people are shaped by their social experiences and that, as a result, the social experiences of the government’s workforce matter.⁵ In fact, the presence of a diverse public workforce “implies equal access to government positions promoting empowerment and connection with government in diverse communities, [and] can also signal the inclusion of group interests, attitudes, and experiences in government decision making and build government legitimacy.”⁶ This is true at all levels of government in Utah, including the municipal, county, and state levels.

Yet, research has shown that Utah’s socially conservative culture reinforces gender-based expectations and that those expectations play out in the experiences of Utah’s women leaders.⁷ Utah is one of the nation’s most religiously homogenous states,⁸ and while less than half (41.6%) of Utahns identify as active in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the tenets and doctrines of the faith greatly influence Utahns’ daily lives.⁹ Further, gender-based role expectations are not confined to the religious or personal spheres; instead, they permeate broadly throughout Utah’s culture and influence the career experiences of the entire state’s workforce. Yet, amidst the strong influence of traditional cultural norms and expectations, there has been slight progress in terms of gender parity on some fronts and sectors in the state (see previous research [briefs](#) and [snapshots](#)). Acknowledging this context sets the stage for exploring how gender-based expectations may impact women in Utah government.

Study Background

To determine how reflective Utah’s government organizations are of the communities they serve, [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) (UWLP) researchers undertook a groundbreaking study of women in leadership positions at the state level of government. The question asked was “How are women represented in

formal leadership roles within governments in Utah?” The goal was to document a baseline of the number of women in leadership roles that could be used in the future to learn where progress has been made. This brief is the first of a series that will focus on women leaders who work in Utah’s public sector and will be followed by similar research at the county and municipal levels.

Initial data for this research study were collected from the State of Utah’s Department of Human Resources (DHRM). An information request was made for the following: a list of leadership positions; the gender of the person currently in each leadership position; whether the position was considered appointed, merit, or time-limited/part-time; the total overall number of employees for the state; and a breakdown of the total number of men and women employed by each state agency. DHRM provided information on 3,873 leadership positions, representing 24,689 employees across 53 agencies. While 3,873 leadership positions were identified, some of the positions were vacant or the gender of the person in the position was classified as protected. The final analysis of gender representation includes 3,850 leadership positions.

Researchers supplemented these data by gathering information on each agency’s budget and number of employees. In addition, researchers analyzed state agencies by the type of responsibilities and policies they oversee. Finally, each position was identified regarding its level of leadership, from supervisory roles to cabinet-level posts. The results of these additional analyses provided valuable insights into the current status of women leaders within the State of Utah.

Findings Overview

Overall, 39.3% of supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions in the State of Utah government are held by women. According to a 2016 report from the Council of State Governments (based on the most recent data they had, which was from 2007), women in state governments comprised 32.2% of positions that included major policy-making responsibilities. Women of color were more rare, comprising just 6.3% of all department heads and top advisers in governor’s offices.¹⁰ Research by The Center for Women in Government and Civil Society echoed these findings in 2006, indicating that women held 32.2% of state government leadership positions within the executive branch, and 24.7% overall (including state legislative and judicial branches of government) in 2006.¹¹ A more current number is offered by [Governing.com](#), which cites that in 2017, women held 23% of leadership roles at the state and local levels.¹² However, the figure likely reflects only

Overall, women hold 39.3% of supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions in Utah State Government.

top-level leadership roles. Overall, we did not find recent state or national data with which to compare our Utah findings.

To better understand what level of leadership women held in the State of Utah government, researchers categorized each leadership position into one of four levels: Cabinet (top leadership including C-suite executives, elected state officers, and department directors), Executive (deputy directors, division directors, judges, and court administrators), Senior (“middle management” including deputy/assistant division directors, general counsel/attorneys, and court clerks), or Front-line (supervisors, managers, administrators, coordinators, and analysts). These categories were designed to mirror the terminology frequently used in the private sector (see Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Leadership Level

Leadership Level	Female	Male	% Female
Cabinet	13	35	27.1%
Executive	123	206	37.4%
Senior	120	297	28.8%
Front-line	1258	1798	41.2%
Total	1514	2336	39.3%

National and global researchers have discussed the leaky leadership “pipeline,” where comparable numbers of men and women start as front-line employees, yet as they progress through the leadership ranks, there are fewer and fewer women, particularly women of color.¹³ The problem is not simply the overall numbers of women in the public sector workforce; it is how those numbers are spread across the different levels of leadership. The data for Utah show its workforce has 47.95% women and 52.05% men. While women make up almost half of the state’s government workforce, their representation in leadership roles varies. Women comprise 41.2% of front-line leadership positions yet only 28.8% of senior leadership roles. Moving to higher leadership levels, women comprise 37.4% of executive leadership positions and 27.1% of cabinet-level roles. Overall, these trends support the notion that women are less likely to become leaders in Utah State Government than men are. However, the higher percentage of executive-level vs. senior leadership is rather unexpected. A deeper analysis of equity efforts or cultural dynamics within agencies could uncover more details about these phenomena.

To put the Utah data in perspective, national employment data for the public sector from 2013 reflect highly gendered leadership, with men holding a significant majority (70%) of executive leadership positions.¹⁴ Similar numbers were found in 2004 research on state workers in Florida, which showed that women held 34.1% of upper-management positions.¹⁵ Other research in 2006 by the Center for Women in Government and Civil Society shows that women comprised 29.7% of department heads (executive level) and 41.0% of top advisors in governors’ offices (cabinet level).¹⁶ In their research, Utah ranked 31st on the total percentage (21.9%) of women

policy leadership positions in state executive, legislative, and judicial branches.¹⁷ However, because there are no recent comparable data, we are not certain where Utah ranks in 2020 with other states or with the national government.

Agency Categories, Typologies, & Clusters

The data provided by DHRM included 53 agencies, divisions, or entities that oversee various areas of the state’s responsibilities and duties. In the data-sorting process, agencies were grouped in various of ways. First, larger agencies that included a substantial number of employees in leadership roles were reported separately (e.g., Courts, Human Services, Health, and Workforce Services), while smaller agencies were grouped based on their having similar functions. For example, the Senate, House of Representatives, Legislative Research & General Counsel, Legislative Fiscal Analysts, Legislative Auditor General, and Legislative Services were clustered under the heading “Legislative.” Results of this analysis are shown in Table 2 as Agency Categories.

It should be noted that, for the purposes of this study, Public Education relates to state-level positions in public education (K–12) as well as the Schools for the Deaf and Blind. It does not represent leadership positions within higher education organizations and excludes specific schools and school districts at the K–12 levels.

Table 2: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Agency Category

Agency or Division	Female	Male	% Female
Courts	136	67	67.0%
Human Services	391	249	61.1%
Health	140	89	61.1%
Public Education	58	37	61.1%
Public Service/Heritage & Arts	26	17	60.5%
Workforce Services	166	130	56.1%
Alcoholic Beverage Control	30	25	54.5%
Finance & Tax	84	86	49.4%
Legislative	9	12	42.9%
Economic Dev. & Commerce	29	45	39.2%
Attorney General	32	52	38.1%
Corrections & Justice	123	356	25.7%
Public Safety	57	165	25.7%
Administrative Svcs.	23	74	23.7%
Environment & Agriculture	116	423	21.5 %
Technology	26	99	20.8%
Transportation	54	326	14.2%
National Guard/Veteran Affairs	9	82	9.9%
Other*	5	2	71.4%
Total	1514	2336	39.3%

*Includes Capital Preservation, Office of Energy Development, Career Service Review Office, Department of Human Resource Management, and the Navajo Trust Administration.

The agency with the highest percentage of women leaders is Utah’s Courts, at 67%. Also topping the list were Human Services, Health, Public Education, and Public Service Commission/Heritage & Arts, all having more than 60% women in their management and leadership ranks. However, the overrepresentation of women in these agencies could divert attention from the concentration of women in some agencies but not others, such as Environment & Agriculture (21.5%), Technology (20.8%), Transportation (14.2%), and National Guard/Office of Veteran Affairs (9.9%), which showed the lowest percentages of women in formal leadership roles. Not surprisingly, statistical tests do show significant differences between agencies and agency categories in terms of the representation of women in all levels of leadership roles (see Appendix for details by agency category). These results echo national data that show women in 22% of leadership roles in transportation and in 30% of leadership positions in environment and agriculture agencies, while they hold 60% of leadership positions within health agencies and 66% in human service agencies.¹⁸

A second data analysis documented the State’s clustering of agencies into similar budget categories, as found on the State’s [Compendium of Budget Information](#) website, referred to in this research as Budget Grouping (see Table 3). Following national trends, the top two clusters with the highest number of women in leadership positions are Public Education (K–12 and postsecondary) and Social Services. Both are considered redistributive agencies (see upcoming definitions for terms), in which it would be expected to see more women. Conversely, agencies considered regulatory (such as criminal justice, agriculture, and natural resources) or administrative show fewer women in leadership positions.

Table 3: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Budget Cluster

Agency or Division	Female	Male	% Female
Public Education	58	37	61.1%
Social Services	689	455	60.2%
Business, Economic Dev. & Labor	159	161	49.7%
Executive Offices & Criminal Justice	369	668	35.6%
Natural Resources, Agriculture & Environmental Quality	118	424	21.8%
Executive Appropriations	20	94	17.5%
Infrastructure & General Government	101	497	16.9%
Total	1514	2336	39.3%

Agency typology provided a third way in which agency data were analyzed. Research on the public sector has consistently pointed out how gender plays a significant role in the way government organizations are structured and staffed. Grouping government agencies by typology—or the types of responsibilities and policies they oversee—is a useful way to bring attention to the gendered environments in government

organizations.¹⁹ For this study, each state agency was identified by one of the four common typologies: administrative, distributive, redistributive, or regulatory.²⁰

A considerable body of research by public administration scholars has identified “masculine” agencies as primarily administrative (providing general infrastructure support), distributive (dealing with the general population, including agencies such as transportation and energy), and regulatory (focusing on implementing control and regulatory policies, including agencies such as business and economic development, labor, defense, transportation, taxes, budget, criminal justice, natural resources, agriculture, and environmental quality). “Feminine” agencies are mainly redistributive agencies (reallocating money and services), including agencies such as education, social services, healthcare, the arts, and veteran’s affairs. Because departments and divisions tend to adopt masculine and feminine divisions of labor, where a woman works often impacts her career progression.²¹

The State of Utah’s data on the distribution of female leadership according to agency typology clearly reflects a statistically significant gendered division of labor (see Table 4).

Table 4: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Typology

Typology	Female	Male	% Female
Administrative	58	183	24.1%
Distributive	56	327	14.6%
Redistributive	772	513	60.1%
Regulatory	628	1313	32.4%
Total	1514	2336	39.3%

These data illustrate that, as predicted, redistributive agencies have the majority of women in leadership positions at 60.1%. State agencies considered to be distributive show only 14.6% of leadership positions held by women. Typology analysis reinforced that the high number of women leaders within the Courts, considered to be a regulatory agency, is an anomaly for Utah. Additional analysis may provide insight into how the Courts have succeeded in advancing so many women into leadership positions.

Overall, when analyzing the leadership data by typology, it becomes clear that women have a better chance of being promoted in predominantly feminine organizations, which are usually redistributive agencies. That is important because redistributive agencies are typically much less involved in informing public policy. Considering the significant and far-reaching decisions made by top-level government leaders, the fact that women hold comparatively few influential leadership positions outside of redistributive agencies is a concern.

Employee Number, Budget, & Classification

Analysis also focused on whether the size of the state agency—based on the overall number of employees—influenced whether the agency was supervised by a woman or a man (see Table 5).

Table 5: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Agency’s Number of Employees

Number of Employees	Female	Male	% Female
0–24	28	44	38.9%
25–99	59	92	39.1%
100–499	104	250	29.4%
500–999	199	249	44.4%
1,000–34,000	1124	1701	39.8%
Total	1514	2336	39.3%

Agencies that had 500–999 employees (Public Education, Tax Commission, Technology Services, Attorney General, and Alcoholic Beverage Control) had the highest percentage of women at 44.4%. The lowest percentages of women in leadership positions were found in agencies that had 100–499 employees (Environmental Quality, National Guard, Commerce, Administrative Services, Heritage & Arts, Department of Human Resource Management, and Labor Commission) at 29.4%. This is somewhat different from national research, which suggests that women are more likely to be leaders over smaller organizations, have fewer people to supervise, and have fewer financial responsibilities.²²

A similar approach was taken to learn if there were any distinctions on the number of women leaders based on the size of agency budgets (see Table 6).

Table 6: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Size of Budget

Budget	Female	Male	% Female
\$0–10M	54	91	37.2%
\$11M–\$49M	74	94	44.0%
\$50M–\$99M	81	165	32.9%
\$100M–899M	504	1170	30.1%
\$900M–\$6B	801	816	49.5%
Total	1514	2336	39.3%

Again, Utah does not align with national research that suggests women were more likely to be responsible for smaller budgets. Interestingly, agencies with a budget of \$900M–\$6B (Education, Health, Transportation, Workforce Services and Human Services) had almost half (49.5%) of their leadership comprised of women. The lowest rates of women leaders were found in agencies with budgets in the \$100M–\$899M range (including Corrections, Courts, Public Safety, Natural Resources, Technology Services, Environmental Quality, Administrative Services, and Tax Commission).

Finally, researchers looked at whether the position classification had any connection to gender. Position classifications were either appointed, merit, or time-limited/part-time. In government agencies, appointed positions are assigned by a high government official and often carry a sense of trust or authority. Merit positions are gained through the process of promoting and hiring government employees based on a competitive process that determines their ability to perform a job, rather than on political connections. The last category of

time-limited/part-time indefinitely refers to specific parameters regarding the position, either by tenure or hours worked. See Table 7 for the percentage of females in each of these classifications.

Table 7: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Position Classification

Position Classification	Female	Male	% Female
Appointed	388	530	42.3%
Merit	1111	1738	39.0%
Time Limited/Part-time Indefinitely	15	68	18.1%
Total	1514	2336	39.3%

Overall, the State of Utah has a considerable number of women in appointed positions (42.3%) that are recognized as positions of trust and authority and often have opportunities to influence public policy. The percentage compares to 2006 national research that found an average of 41% of the top appointed advisors to a governor’s office were women.²³ No recent state or national comparison data could be located, which means this study will be one of the few available of its kind in the United States.

Recommendations

Although these data are somewhat encouraging compared to other sectors in Utah, a more intentional effort is needed to achieve gender diversity in Utah’s state government agencies. By looking more closely at women’s representation in leadership positions, we can see where the state is doing well and where there are opportunities to improve. It is particularly important, perhaps now more than ever, that our government organizations better reflect the diversity of our communities.

The current research shows that state agencies that oversee distributive and administrative functions have high levels of gender-based separation. The demographic makeup of agency employees impacts far-reaching decisions. Diversifying the state’s workforce would provide a greater range of perspectives for identifying and implementing policy—and for solving complex problems. State government leaders have begun to implement strategies to diversify leadership; however, there remain opportunities for improvement. We offer the following eight recommendations:

1. Make it clear that diversity is part of the organizational culture, with elected officials and top cabinet members playing an active role in prioritizing gender diversity and communicating that throughout state agencies. When leaders are committed to inclusion, they can become a driving force in making sure that their agencies are proactively addressing inequities and promoting diversity.
2. Develop strategic plans that clearly show steps for recruiting and advancing women, with an eye to women of color, into leadership positions, particularly in agencies that may be considered “non-traditional” for women.

3. Evaluate hiring processes to eliminate potentially outdated language, unnecessary minimum qualifications, and other exclusionary measures. This includes auditing job postings and interview questions and discarding practices meant to keep people out. It also means taking a critical eye to assessment policies to ensure they are valid and job related.
4. Update interview practices for hiring managers with a lens to diversity. This means working to remove bias from hiring practices by including diverse hiring panels to identify blindspots and expand perspectives.
5. Be more intentional about the leadership pipeline, particularly when it comes to jobs that have traditionally been designed for men (consciously or unconsciously). This could include incorporating gender-neutral language (e.g., man-power=staff, foreman=crew chief, fireman=firefighter).²⁴
6. Emphasize the need for training agency managers to raise their awareness of gender equity and to provide proper ways to address gender bias in the workplace. This includes incorporating unconscious bias training that addresses negative stereotypes of women managers and shows the benefits of hiring women leaders.
7. Train both women and men to react/respond appropriately when they encounter gender bias in language, behavior, or policy. Responses can be made in a professional manner and still address the issue effectively.
8. Finally, commit to transparency. In order to make significant changes, it is important to keep gender diversity a priority by tracking and sharing the data, both inside and outside of the organization.

Conclusion

Overall, we found higher percentages of women in leadership roles at the front-line level, in agencies that are considered redistributive, and in larger agencies with higher budgets. While the overall numbers would suggest that the State of Utah is doing reasonably well regarding the advancement of women, it deceptively hides the lack of advancement opportunities of women in non-traditional areas.

As government organizations face increasing challenges, incorporating solutions that consider a variety of experiences and perspectives can become a valuable tool for government leaders. Research shows the benefits of diverse leadership teams include improved strategic decision making, increased capacity for problem solving, enhanced resilience, increased innovation, and expanded capacity to adapt to change. A lack of women's equal representation in the leadership ranks stands in stark contrast to the goal of a diverse government workforce. Having women at top levels can inspire other women to pursue their own advancement. It also increases the willingness to routinely hire and promote highly skilled, competent women.

Understanding the relationship between gender and those who are in positions to influence agenda-setting strategies and public policy can translate into behavior-changing actions. Identifying and mitigating persistent challenges and barriers clears the way for enhanced opportunities for women's equal repre-

sentation across state agencies and leadership levels. This shift will benefit not only women and government organizations, but also families, communities, and the state as a whole.

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APPENDIX
State of Utah Leadership Pipeline
Percentage of Women by Agency Category

Category Label	% Women Employees	% Women Front-line Leaders	% Women Senior Leaders	% Women Executive Leaders	% Women Cabinet	% Women Leaders Overall
Administrative Services	34.9	24.3	26.7	9.1	100.0	23.7
Alcoholic Beverage Control	51.6	55.1	50.0	66.7	0.0	54.5
Attorney General	49.7	77.8	32.3	42.9	33.3	38.1
Corrections & Justice	28.8	27.9	13.6	25.5	33.3	25.7
Courts	69.4	68.3	65.7	25.0	0.0	67.0
Economic Dev. & Commerce	46.1	46.7	36.4	25.0	0.0	39.2
Environment & Agriculture	32.1	22.6	11.3	27.0	0.0	21.5
Finance & Tax	62.1	60.0	39.1	37.5	20.0	49.4
Health	69.8	64.9	41.7	56.7	0.0	61.1
Human Services	64.0	62.2	52.2	42.3	100.0	61.1
Legislative	43.7	50.0	16.7	50.0	66.7	42.9
National Guard/Office of Veteran Affairs	18.2	10.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.9
Public Education	75.1	67.9	14.3	58.1	75.0	61.1
Public Safety	40.6	30.2	8.6	0.0	0.0	25.7
Public Service/Heritage & Arts	69.2	55.6	50.0	80.0	50.0	60.5
Technology	24.1	22.2	13.3	20.0	0.0	20.8
Transportation	16.7	13.1	40.0	44.4	0.0	14.2
Workforce Services	66.4	60.6	36.0	40.7	0.0	56.1
Other*	61.7	0.0	100.0	66.7	0.0	71.4
TOTAL	48.0%	41.2%	28.8%	37.4%	27.1%	39.3%

*Note: Includes Capital Preservation, Office of Energy Development, Career Service Review Office, Department of Human Resource Management, and the Navajo Trust Administration.