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The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Childcare and Homeschooling

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 has impacted workers across the globe. Women have been disproportionately impacted during this time. At one point during the pandemic, a publication from the National Women’s Law Center reported that women dropped out of the workforce at a rate four times that of men.¹ Utah has seen similar negative impacts on working women. The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah reported that from 2019 to 2020, jobs held by women declined at a rate more than double that of men, and unemployment rose more for females than males.² One major reason for these discrepancies is likely the large burden women have carried for childcare and homeschooling children as daycare facilities and schools were closed in efforts to curb the spread of the virus. In fact, a McKinsey and Lean In study³ reported that, in dual-income households, mothers were three times more likely than fathers to bear the main responsibility for a majority of housework and childcare. Gallup recently confirmed that women with children left the workforce at a significantly greater rate than men with children.⁴

Although the experiences of Utah women tend to be similar in many ways to those of women across the United States, the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) has found in past research that women in the state do experience at least some challenges differently. To better understand Utah women’s experiences specifically, UWLP researchers conducted an extensive, in-depth survey focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 on women and work. The survey was opened for data collection in January 2021 to all Utah women aged 20 and older who were either currently employed or who were unemployed due to the pandemic. The aim was to understand more clearly the experiences of Utah women as they have navigated paid work during the pandemic. This comprehensive study included the collection of data on a wide variety of topic areas and included both quantitative and open-ended questions to capture participants’ perceptions and experiences. This brief is the third in a series of related reports.⁵

This research and policy brief highlights the results of the survey related to the following:

- 1) The emotional impact of COVID-19,
- 2) Household and caregiving concerns,
- 3) Childcare and online schooling concerns,
- 4) Impact of the presence of a partner in the home and other demographics, and
- 5) Workplace culture and concerns.

Study Background

An online survey instrument was administered to a non-probability sample of Utah women representing different set-

tings, backgrounds, and situations (i.e., age, education, race/ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status, county/region, job type, sector/industry, hours worked per week, employment status, and workplace situation). A call for participants was announced through the UWLP monthly newsletter, social media platforms, and website. In addition, research team members worked closely with nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce, government agencies, municipalities and counties, women’s networks and associations, multicultural groups, businesses, universities, churches, and volunteers who all assisted in disseminating the survey to their employees and contacts. Additionally, targeted recruitment efforts were made to include women of all demographics throughout the state, including providing the survey in both English and Spanish (see additional design information in the endnotes).⁶

Overall, 3,542 Utah women completed the survey. The demographics for survey respondents are summarized in Table 1. We note that the question about the number of children living at home was added to the survey in the middle of data collection, so the demographics listed for that question apply to the 1,300 women who responded after the question was inserted. All other questions were included prior to opening the survey in January. It is also important to note that this sample is not representative of the state in several respects. For example, when compared to overall state demographics, this study under sampled women of color, women with less formal education, women in lower income ranges, and women from certain industries. Women who work in education may be overrepresented.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<i>Age:</i> 20–29 (18.4%), 30–39, (29.4%), 40–49 (27.4%), 50–59 (17.4%), 60–69 (6.6%), 70+ (0.8%)
<i>Marital Status:</i> married (68.1%), separated/divorced (8.9%), single (16.4%), widowed (1.0%), domestic partner (5.2%)
<i>Education:</i> high school (3.3%), some college (15.0%), associate degree (6.6%), bachelor’s degree (35.8%), graduate degree (39.3%)
<i>Ethnicity:</i> White (90.6%), Hispanic/Latina (6.9%), Asian (2.5%), Pacific Islander (1.2%), Black (1.2%), American Indian (1.2%) Other (0.8%)
<i>Number of Children Living at Home:</i> none (60.4%), 1 (0.6%), 2 (2.5%), 3 (17.1%), 4 (6.5%), 5 (5.4%), 6 (3.3%), 7+ (4.2%)
<i>2020 Household Income:</i> Less than \$25K (5.3%), \$25K–34.9K (5.1%), \$35K–\$49K (9.5%), \$50K–\$74K (18.0%), \$75K–\$99K (17.9%), \$100K–\$149K (23.0%), \$150K–\$199K (10.2%), \$200K or more (11.1%)
<i>County:</i> Salt Lake (39.2%), Utah County (17.8%), Box Elder/Cache/Rich (9.6%), Davis/Morgan (9.4%), Weber (6.1%), Washington (4.5%), Carbon/Emery/Grand/San Juan (3.4%),

Summit/Wasatch (2.8%), Kane/Iron/Beaver/Garfield (2.3%), Daggett/Duchesne/Uintah (1.9%), Juab/Millard/Piute/Sanpete/Sevier/Wayne (1.8%), Tooele (1.2%)
<i>Industry:</i> Education (33.1%), Nonprofit (11.1%), Government (10.7%), Healthcare (10.4%), Other (7.6%), Information Technology (7.0%), Professional Services (6.4%), Financial Services (4.5%), Sales (2.8%), Food Services (1.5%), Hospitality and Tourism (1.3%), Construction (1.3%), Transportation (1.1%), Manufacturing (1.1%)
<i>Job Type:</i> Front Line (31.5%), Team Lead/Supervisor (15.6%), Professional (26.8%), Manager/Director (20.2%), Executive (5.8%)

Note: Percentages in some categories do not equal 100% due to decimal rounding or individuals indicating more than one ethnic or race identity.

Emotional Impact of COVID-19 on Women

The first two UWLP briefs in this series of COVID-19 reports have demonstrated the negative impact that COVID has had on Utah women at work. The first (Changes, Burnout, & Hope) confirmed that 15.9% of Utah working women exhibited one or more forms of workplace withdrawal (e.g., taking a leave of absence, moving from full-time to part-time hours, switching to less demanding jobs, being furloughed).⁷ However, the effects of COVID have included other physical and emotional challenges as well. As shown in Table 2 (these are statistical means, with 1 being “strongly disagree,” 4 being “neutral,” and 7 being “strongly agree” on the survey scales), participants generally felt that their own mental health had declined and that they were more burned out because of the pandemic. They also worried about the physical and mental health of their loved ones. Study participants also agreed that the pandemic was harder on mothers than fathers when it came to managing home and work responsibilities. The rest of this brief specifically examines some of these difficulties by focusing on concerns related to childcare and homeschooling.

Table 2. Emotional Effects of COVID-19

Survey Question	Mean
I feel like my mental health has declined this past year.	5.12
I feel more burned out than before the pandemic.	5.51
I worry more now about the mental and physical health of my loved ones.	5.80
The pandemic has been harder on mothers than on fathers in terms of managing home and paid work responsibilities.	5.67

Note: 7-point agreement scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

Household and Caregiving Concerns

A mixed picture emerges regarding perceptions of household and caregiving concerns (see the *All* column in Table 3). The statistical means were above the neutral midpoint (4) in respondents’ assessments of stress and exhaustion from caregiving concerns (e.g., elderly, sick family), household duties,

and balancing home and work responsibilities. However, respondents also were slightly positive (above the midpoint) about equal distribution of household chores and satisfaction with caregiving responsibilities. Yet, when comparing respondents with and without kids (see the *Kids – Yes and No* columns), “exhaustion” and “struggling to balance work-life role” agreement levels were higher, and perceptions of “household equality/satisfaction” agreement levels were lower for those with children under 18.

Those with children in the home agreed more strongly that they felt exhausted due to their responsibilities at home, with an average score of 4.75—which is between “neutral” (4) and “somewhat agree” (5)—whereas those without children under 18 responded with an average score of 3.81 (between “somewhat disagree” and “neutral.” This may highlight the added difficulty and stress associated with raising children during the pandemic, especially as schools and daycares shut down, and parents (women especially) were forced to adjust to this additional pressure in balancing work and home life.

Table 3. Household and Caregiving Concerns

Survey Question	All	Kids under 18	
		Yes	No
I am exhausted because of my additional responsibilities at home.	4.36	4.75	3.81
I find myself struggling more with balancing work and home responsibilities than I did before the pandemic.	4.69	5.03	4.35
I share household chores in my home equitably with my spouse/partner.	4.69	4.56	4.87
I am satisfied with how household/caregiving responsibilities are shared between myself and my spouse or partner.	4.62	4.44	4.85

Note: 7-point agreement scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

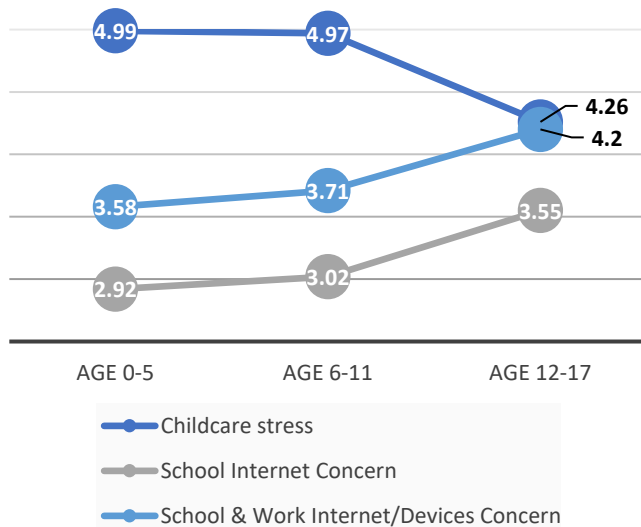
To ensure that the average scores were a fair representation of the variety of answers selected by the survey takers, we next examined the frequency of agreement versus neutral versus disagreement. Respondents who answered with any level of disagreement (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree) were counted as “disagree” in this next step. Participants who responded with any level of agreement (5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree) were counted as “agree” in this next step. Frequency analysis of those recoded groupings indicated a significant difference in the percentages between the respondents who had children in the household and those who did not. An example is the statement “I am exhausted because of my additional responsibilities at home.” Of the group without children in the home, 37.0% agreed, 22.3% were neutral, and 40.7% disagreed. For the group who did have children in the home, 61.7% agreed, 14.5% were neutral, and 23.8% disagreed. Thus, there is a substantial difference in agreement between groups (37.0% versus 61.7%). Similar results were found for the other three questions.

Women of color were more likely to agree that they are exhausted and struggling to balance work and home life. For example, Latina women agreed slightly more that their home responsibilities are making them exhausted (4.59) and that they struggled to balance work and home responsibilities (4.82), as compared to White women (4.34 and 4.69, respectively). Women without college degrees agreed slightly more that home responsibilities were exhausting (4.59) when compared to women with college degrees (4.31). However, women with college degrees found it slightly more difficult to balance work and home responsibilities (4.71) than those without degrees (4.61).

Childcare and Online School Concerns

Next, we examined those with children under 18 to determine the specific effects of the pandemic on childcare and homeschooling. Specifically, we found that working women agreed that childcare concerns were at least somewhat stressful (4.73). However, they somewhat disagreed regarding concern about both access to reliable internet for online schooling (3.16) and having adequate internet/devices to support working and schooling from home (3.81). The average scores fell between somewhat disagree (3) and neutral (4). Figure 1 demonstrates how agreement with those concerns changed, depending on the age of the children.

Figure 1. Childcare and Online School Concerns by Children’s Age



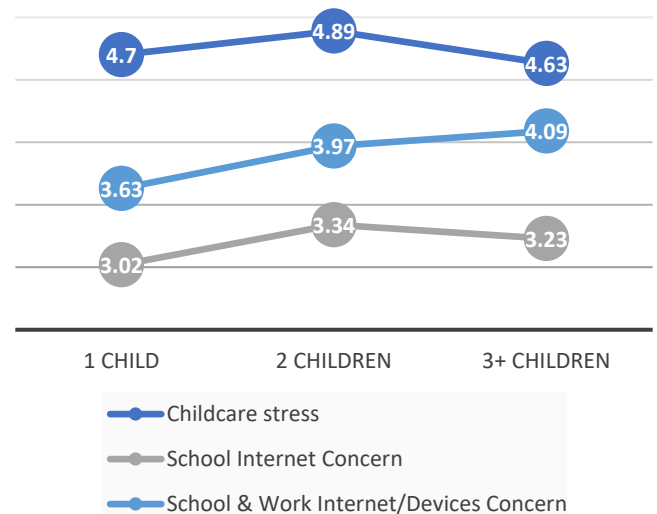
Note: Respondents with children in multiple age categories were counted in each relevant age category.

Parents with the youngest children (ages 0–5) had the highest agreement regarding childcare stress (4.99) and lowest internet and work/school concerns (2.92 and 3.58, respectively). Parents with children ages 6–11 were similar, but with slightly lower childcare stress agreement levels (4.97) and higher internet and work/school concerns (3.02 and 3.71, respectively—but still below neutral). Having older children at home (ages 12–17) substantially reduced agreement regarding childcare stress (4.26), which could be because these older children could manage themselves and take on greater re-

sponsibility in caring for younger siblings. However, having older children also increased internet concerns (3.55, closer to neutral) and concerns regarding sufficient internet and devices to manage both work and school (4.20). This could have been because of the greater online demands of teens in middle school and high school, not only in an online schooling environment but with computer-based homework when the student was attending school in person. It is important to note that by January 2021, many childcare and homeschooling concerns may have subsided.

We also examined these variables by the number of children under 18 each respondent had living at home (see Figure 2). As expected, having more children aligned with having more concern about adequate internet and electronic devices to manage both work and school. However, both childcare stress and concerns for reliable internet increased from one child to two children but decreased from two children to three or more children.

Figure 2. Childcare and Online School Concerns by Number of Children



Frankly, the varying levels of childcare stress may align with the finding that having more children was positively correlated with having older children (ages 12–17; $r = .55$). Thus, the older children could reduce parental stress by taking over some household responsibilities and/or helping with the younger children. Similarly, the varying levels of concern about reliable internet may reflect the finding that having more children was negatively related to having younger children (ages 0–5; $r = -.74$). Thus, participants with only one child are less likely to have children in school. Those with two or more children are more likely to have children in school, and they are more likely to be concerned with having reliable internet. But that concern remains relatively stable regardless of the number of children in school.

Interestingly, participants’ levels of concern for internet access and the availability of adequate technological devices revealed differences in many demographics. For example, the agreement of women of color regarding school concern with computer/internet access was 3.53, while agreement was 3.02

for White women. A similar effect was found in reported education levels; technology concerns were greater for women without a college degree. Finally, the data showed that concerns over adequate computer/internet access grew stronger the lower the income reported by the participant. There was some overlap in these results because White respondents were more likely than women of color to have a college degree (76% vs. 71%) and to have a higher reported income.

Impact of Partners and Other Demographics

Next, we examined the differences between single mothers and mothers living with a partner (see Table 4). Across the board, single working mothers had higher levels of agreement regarding the negative outcomes of COVID-19. This was true for burnout, childcare concerns, reduced physical and mental health, and access to reliable internet and sufficient electronic devices for online schooling and work.

Table 4. Childcare Concerns by Presence of Partner

Survey Question	Living w/ Partner	
	Yes	No
I feel more burned out than before the pandemic.	5.59	5.69
Childcare concerns are (or have been) a major stress in my life.	4.59	4.90
I feel like my physical health has declined this past year.	4.38	4.86
I feel like my mental health has declined this past year.	5.10	5.30
Access to a computer and/or fast and reliable internet service for my children to do school and homework has been a concern.	3.00	3.28
Access to multiple computers and/or adequate internet service that can support me and my family members working and/or schooling from home simultaneously has been a concern.	3.52	3.78

Note: 7-point agreement scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

This difference is especially important to consider when examining race. Specifically, Hispanic/Latina respondents with children were much more likely to report being a single parent (21%) than were White respondents with kids (13%). Thus, these women were more likely to be struggling from stress around childcare and concern around internet and computers. For those living with a partner (spouse or domestic partner), our survey also showed that equitable sharing of household chores and childcare responsibilities is correlated with lower perceptions of physical and mental decline, childcare-related stress, and burnout.

Workplace Culture and Concerns

Providing employee support and a positive work environment is one critical way companies can reduce employee stress and

other negative impacts of balancing work and non-work roles, especially in remote working situations and for mothers. Our survey results show that there is plenty of opportunity for improvement in this regard. Examining the overall sample, respondents were neutral (on the 7-point scale), on average, regarding whether remote work had increased inclusivity in their companies (4.15) and whether gender equity was a priority in the workplace (3.88). However, employees generally had hope that their organization will thrive (5.64) and will create a positive work environment (5.36) after the pandemic is over.

In Table 5, we examined the differences in perceptions of employers between women with and without children. On the positive side, working women with children at home agreed slightly more that working remotely had facilitated a more inclusive environment. Perceptions that the organization would create a positive work environment after the pandemic was similar across the two groups. However, those with kids were also more worried about being judged negatively because of the challenges with balancing work and home roles. They also felt less comfortable sharing work-life challenges at work and were more likely to consider leaving their job. These fears demonstrate that employers may not know what challenges working women are facing without being proactive in gathering the information, and employees are unlikely to be forthcoming unless they trust that doing so will not have a negative impact on their careers. Hence, without acting to foster trust and inclusivity, employers may risk losing valuable employees.

Table 5. Utah Women’s Perceptions of Employers

Survey Question	Kids under 18	
	Yes	No
I worry more now about being judged negatively by my boss and co-workers because of the challenge of balancing work and home.	3.86	3.39
I worry about my performance being judged negatively because of my caregiving responsibilities.	4.04	3.45
I am not comfortable sharing work-life challenges at work.	3.96	3.81
I trust that the organization/company I work for will do what is right in creating the best work environment post-pandemic.	5.31	5.32
Working remotely has facilitated a more inclusive environment.	4.12	4.07
I have considered leaving my job.	3.67	3.57

Note: 7-point agreement scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

These work-family concerns are especially salient for workers in a few specific industries. Women in the food services industry had the highest average fear of being judged negatively when working to balance work and home (4.38), likely due to the necessity to work on-site and inability to work from home. Food services workers were also the highest in

terms of thinking about leaving their job (5.00). Women in healthcare services and financial services were least likely, on average, to share work-life challenges at work (4.09 and 3.94, respectively). Women in manufacturing and hospitality/leisure were most likely to report concerns with their performance being judged negatively due to childcare concerns (4.36 and 4.11, respectively). In terms of race, women of color had stronger fears of their work performance being judged negatively (4.10) and were less likely to share work-life challenges (4.14), compared to White women (3.83 and 3.82, respectively).

Recommendations and Conclusions

This research and policy brief sheds light on some of the non-work-related effects of COVID 19 on women in Utah's labor force, particularly those with children in the home. Due to COVID-19, Utah women in the labor force are dealing with many challenges related to home and children that are impacting their experiences with paid work. Those struggles are magnified for mothers with children in the home and, in particular, single mothers in the labor force.

In summary, Utah women agree that they suffered increased burnout and decreased mental health, and they also feel burdened by worrying about the welfare of their loved ones and managing both home and work duties. Women with children under 18 in the home agree more strongly than those without kids that balancing home and work roles is difficult. They are also less likely to agree that household and caregiving responsibilities are equitably shared. Many women also have concerns about adequate internet and devices for online schooling. Concerns over childcare are less prevalent for those with older children, but adequate resources for online schooling becomes more prevalent for those with older children. Single working mothers also agree more strongly that their burnout increased during the pandemic, that childcare concerns are a major stressor, that physical and mental health have declined, and they have experienced greater concerns regarding access to adequate internet and devices for online schooling. Finally, in terms of workplace culture, women with children who are in the labor force worry more about being judged negatively for having to balance work and home responsibilities. Perhaps because of these factors, they are less likely to feel comfortable sharing work-life challenges and more likely to consider leaving their job.

Based on the results of this research, there are important actions that can help with a more equitable recovery for Utah women in the workforce. First, in the home, where present, partners can help women buffer the challenges highlighted in this brief by sharing household and childcare responsibilities. Second, employers can foster an inclusive environment and initiate communication with employees to understand these challenges and to provide adequate support and reasonable accommodations where needed. This will provide not only positive social good, but it is also likely to have a positive impact on business outcomes by increasing employees' psychological safety and organizational commitment, thus fostering increased job performance and employee retention. And

third, Utah state and local governments can implement policies that support positive changes in terms of childcare, flexible work arrangements, family leave policies, gender pay gap, and career relaunching programs.

As Utah leaders and residents do more to understand the physical, behavioral, and emotional effects that Utah women have faced related to COVID-19, a more equitable recovery can be crafted. This will, in turn, strengthen our businesses, communities, and the state as a whole.

¹ National Women's Law Center. (2020, October). *Four times more women than men dropped out of the labor force in September*. <https://nwlc-ciaw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/september-jobs-fs1.pdf>

² Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. (2021, March). *COVID-19 impacts by gender*. <https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/C19Impacts-FS-Mar2021.pdf>

³ McKinsey & Company, & Lean In. (2020). *Women in the workplace 2020*. https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2020.pdf

⁴ Rothwell, J., & Saad, L. (2021, March 8). *How have U.S. working women fared during the pandemic?* Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/330533/working-women-fared-during-pandemic.aspx>

⁵ Hansen, J., Hartwell, C., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, April 6). *The impact of COVID-19 on Utah women and work: Changes, burnout, & hope*. Utah Women & Leadership Project.

<https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/30-impact-of-covid-19-on-utah-women-work-changes-burnout-hope.pdf>; Christensen, M., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, May 5). *The impact of COVID-19 on Utah women and work: Career advancement challenges*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/32-covid-19-career-advancement-challenges.pdf>

⁶ While this sampling design was a combination of nonprobability sampling techniques (i.e., convenience sampling, snowball sampling, expert judgmental sampling, targeted quota sampling) and did not use a statistical probability sampling frame (through randomized contact or stratified or cluster sampling), the volume of responses and the large variety of survey taker demographics described in Table 1 permit many observations and provide strong support for comparing different groups of responses.

⁷ Hansen, J., Hartwell, C., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, April 6).

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