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Recommended Citation

Winkel, R., Darowski, E. S., Christensen, M., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, October 5). Utah gender wage gap: A 2021 update. Utah Women & Leadership Project Research Snapshot. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/31.pdf>

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Utah Gender Wage Gap: A 2021 Update

Setting the Stage

The gender wage gap is the difference between what women and men earn for performing full-time, year-round paid work. Nationally, women earn 16–18% less than men.¹ Although the gap has substantially narrowed from 41% when the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963, varying reports estimate that, depending on the rate of change, it may take anywhere from 40 to 130 years to close the gap.² Estimates suggest that over a 40-year career, the wage gap can amount to a lifetime earnings deficit of \$80k to \$800k.³ In Utah, women earn approximately 30% less than men, ranking close to last in most state comparisons,⁴ which is consistent with what we reported in 2017. With approximately 60% of women over age 16 participating in the labor force,⁵ this topic is highly relevant for Utah. Closing the gender wage gap will strengthen economic stability and prosperity for families, communities, and the state. This research snapshot, an update from a [2017 report](#), focuses on three main areas:

- 1) An overview of the gender wage gap and its definition, components, and significance;
- 2) An analysis of the unique factors leading to a large gender wage gap in Utah; and
- 3) Recommendations to close this gap in the state.

National Wage Gap Overview

In 2021, the US wage gap is that women earn about 82% (or 18% less) of what men earn.⁶ Multiple factors influence the gap, including occupational segregation, structural dynamics of the labor market, human capital or productivity factors, and gender discrimination and bias.⁷ Socialized cultural norms and attitudes also interact with these factors and affect women's educational, career, and work-life choices.

Although the pay gap is substantial among all American women, it is even higher for women from specific racial and ethnic groups.⁸ For example, compared to the earnings of non-Hispanic White men, women who are Black, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander make 63%, Native American women make 60%, and Hispanic/Latina women make 55%. Furthermore, all women nationally earn less

than men in their same racial or ethnic group.⁹ Along with race/ethnicity, other additional intersectional factors—such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and disabilities—compound to widen the gap.¹⁰

Occupational segregation, where jobs and industries are heavily occupied by one gender, is a key factor in the wage gap; male-dominated fields generally pay more than those dominated by women.¹¹ Additionally, structural dynamics, or how labor market or job practices are designed, can negatively impact women's wages. Such practices include long or inflexible workdays, in-person requirements, and requests for salary history when hiring.¹²

During the COVID-19 pandemic, occupations and industries that women dominate were disproportionately impacted by layoffs, furloughs, and potential exposure to the virus.¹³ In addition, because women do more unpaid care work than men, women were more likely to take unpaid leave or to leave the workforce altogether when schools, daycare, and other care options closed.¹⁴ These circumstances may end up widening the wage gap in future years as breaks in labor force participation affect experience, skill development, and earnings (e.g., the wage gap is smaller for older women who have worked continuously).¹⁵ More generally, career breaks related to caregiving affect pay (particularly for low to middle earners) and other factors related to career success, such as discrimination or how employers perceive women's competence and commitment.¹⁶ Conversely, working fathers do not typically experience such setbacks and often experience benefits from parental status.¹⁷ These examples demonstrate just a few of the ways that women's work-related options and decisions are influenced by structural barriers and cultural norms that can have long-term ramifications.

The gender wage gap decreases when controlling for factors such as age, education, and job selection, yet recent studies have shown a remaining 2% to 8% gender wage gap.¹⁸ The unexplained portion of the gap is often attributed to gender discrimination or implicit biases that affect behavior, which can manifest in workplace practices that inhibit women's advancement. For example, men are often given higher profile or more rewarding job assignments than women and are more likely to appear on

shortlists for promotions.¹⁹ Of broader concern is research indicating that “work done by women simply isn’t valued as highly.”²⁰ When women begin to dominate a typically male-dominated field, the pay drops; conversely, when men begin to dominate a female-dominated field, pay increases.²¹

Some argue the wage gap results from women’s choices—that is, women make education, occupation, industry or work-life decisions that simply lead to lower wages—and thus does not require external intervention.²² While the wage gap has narrowed over time as women have pursued greater educational attainment and workforce participation, researchers agree that women’s decisions are tied to cultural norms, structures, and attitudes such that women’s choices cannot be attributed solely to preference.²³ For example, cultural and social influences can lead women to underestimate their competency and to self-select lower paying work, even when accounting for factors such as education; researchers suggest gender socialization influences how women view themselves, or that “cumulative experiences of pervasive discrimination lead women to undervalue their labor.”²⁴ Similarly, girls’ and women’s attitudes and aspirations related to math and science shift over time, affected by influences such as parental attitudes, media messages, and ability beliefs.²⁵

Cultural gender norms and attitudes also affect how women seek jobs and advancement. Some research has found that women apply to jobs when they meet every qualification, whereas men will apply when they meet only 60%.²⁶ This holds women back from more competitive opportunities and advancement. Women are also less likely to negotiate aggressively for a salary and are often penalized or unsuccessful when trying to do so.²⁷ In this case, women are socialized to be accommodating, and employers may implicitly respond in negative ways to assertive behaviors from women (i.e., the double bind).²⁸

In sum, research confirms that women’s education and labor force decisions contribute to the wage gap, along with occupational segregation and structural dynamics of the labor market. In addition, cultural and gender socialization, along with bias, add another layer of impact. All these factors influence how both men and women evaluate women’s work, their roles in the labor force, and the reward for that work; ultimately, it suggests that what may appear to be decisions of preference by women are often implicitly constrained choices. Importantly, these impacts are compounded for women of color and other marginalized groups.

The Wage Gap in Utah

Utah has one of the largest gender wage gaps in the nation: women earn about 70% (or 30% less) of what men earn,²⁹ which is consistent with what we reported in 2017 (70–71%). The gap is even more pronounced for certain

racial/ethnic groups (see Table 1). These disparities persist despite Utah’s comparatively strong middle class.³⁰

Table 1. Women’s Earnings by Race/Ethnicity as a Percent of White Non-Hispanic Men’s Earnings³¹

Race/Ethnicity of Women	Utah	US
White Non-Hispanic	68%	79%
Asian	66%	87%
Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander	55%	63%
Native American	52%	60%
Black	51%	63%
Hispanic/Latina	49%	55%

Factors that impact the national wage gap also affect Utah. For example, occupational segregation in Utah is prevalent.³² Many Utah women work in lower-paying sectors (e.g., health services and office support) with little career advancement and are more likely than women nationally to work part time and therefore have fewer benefits.³³ Utah women have also moved more slowly into historically male-dominated, higher-paying occupations.³⁴ Although recent data show that Utah women earn slightly more bachelor’s degrees than men, they are less likely to earn graduate or professional degrees³⁵ that lead to higher pay.

Aforementioned family factors may contribute to a higher wage gap in Utah (e.g., via breaks in labor force participation) as the state has one of the nation’s highest marriage rates, the earliest age for marriage, the fourth-highest fertility rate, and the largest average household.³⁶ Utah is also in the top third of most religious states; approximately 60% of adults belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which emphasizes marriage and family.³⁷ Mothers generally participate less in the labor force than fathers, and in Utah, mothers participate even less during child-rearing years.³⁸ Utah women also take on a larger share than men of unpaid work (e.g., care work and household management).³⁹ While Utah fares comparatively well in childcare affordability to other states, it is still unaffordable for most families—especially families with more than one child.⁴⁰ Utah also lags comparatively in accessibility, with an insufficient number of available slots overall, and some counties lacking even a single licensed provider.⁴¹ Both factors contribute to lower maternal labor force participation.

Still, Utah women’s labor force participation has increased over the last 50 years and—despite family variables just described—Utah women actually have a higher labor force participation rate than the national average (due to our younger labor force).⁴² Notably, more than half a million Utah women are single (i.e., never married, divorced, separated, or widowed).⁴³ Female heads of household are also growing in prevalence; almost 25% of Utah mothers are the primary or sole breadwinner, and 50% contribute at least 25% of their family’s total income.⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic proved disproportionately disruptive for Utah women in the labor force. From 2019 to 2020, jobs held by women declined at double the rate of men, reflecting more women leaving the labor force to care for children and older adults and the recession's greater impact on female-dominated occupations (i.e., education/health and leisure/hospitality services).⁴⁵ The compounding responsibilities that women shoulder may be one reason that female-headed households with no spouse present are more likely to experience poverty in Utah, especially if they have children.⁴⁶

In a recent statewide poll, Utah women identified low wages and gender role expectations as their two main challenges; many also perceived their status to be lower than men's in the state.⁴⁷ A national study ranked Utah as the second most sexist state and another found that sexist attitudes are associated with lower pay for women.⁴⁸ Research also suggests that an association between the wage gap and religiosity, regardless of specific religion, is partially connected to social differentiation between genders.⁴⁹ A recent study of college students found that in groups where men outnumber women, "Women are systematically seen as less authoritative and their influence is systematically lower... When they're speaking up, they're not being listened to as much, and interrupted more... Individuals who suppress female speech may do so unwittingly... As a society we have been 'slowly socialized over years to discount' female expertise and perspectives."⁵⁰ In sum, unconscious, socialized norms and biases may influence employers' hiring, pay, and promotion decisions in ways that perpetuate the gender wage gap; they may also impact women's educational and occupational decisions. Again, these norms and biases are compounded for women of color and other marginalized groups or identities.

Closing the Gender Wage Gap in Utah

Whether Utah women work by preference or out of necessity, whether part time or full time, wage parity is critical. Governor Cox's One Utah Roadmap calls on Utah to "improve life outcomes for people with historically and systemically less access to opportunity, including women" and identified narrowing the gender wage gap as an important course of action.⁵¹ To ensure Utah's vibrant economic future, it is critical to extend the prosperity and opportunity many Utahns enjoy to everyone. This will come, in part, through concerted efforts by many stakeholders—including educators, employers, legislators, religious leaders, and individuals—to close the gender wage gap (see suggestions for each stakeholder group in the 2020 Utah Advisory Committee report).⁵²

The reality of the Utah labor force is that most women will be employed for much of their lives.⁵³ Girls and

women in Utah need encouragement to complete post-secondary certificates and degrees. Young women in particular need resources and support to help them navigate family and work options, plan education and career goals accordingly, and be flexible as life unfolds. Cultural norms or attitudes that prevent or deter young women from this decision-making process—that suggest moral implications for women who work outside the home or that put work and family priorities at odds without considering that success can be attainable in both areas—need to be evaluated, discussed openly, and adjusted.

Women of all ages would benefit from a greater awareness of the career options available to them, including occupations and industries that are currently dominated by men and are higher paying. Additionally, women need access to Utah organizations that instruct and support those who wish to re-launch into careers after time spent away from the workforce (see endnote for resources).⁵⁴ It is imperative to deliver these services to women who cannot advance in their careers without training and support, particularly to those experiencing poverty.

Utah's well-respected business community could provide additional support for female-owned businesses, including equitable access to funding, which can alleviate the gender wage gap.⁵⁵ Forward-thinking companies who wish to thrive in a time of heightened economic and social awareness would do well to find ways to support female talent and develop female leadership within their organizations; they can also remove structural and cultural barriers to retaining that female talent. For example, companies could explore flexible work arrangements and alternative career pathways for those who are highly capable and skilled but may not thrive best in the standard eight-to-five mold.⁵⁶ Codifying successful practices such as remote work arrangements, which greatly increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic,⁵⁷ would allow some women to pursue better-paying jobs and fill much-needed positions in the workplace while still maintaining favorable work-life balance. It would also benefit employers, particularly during labor shortages, and parents who are trying to navigate more equitable responsibility at home.

Finally, policy makers should create and strengthen laws that support pay equity (see [this UWLP report](#) for details)⁵⁸ as well as strengthen access to and enforcement of existing employment law. Utah's existing legal protections are considered "weak," and more must be done to help women who are fighting outright discrimination.⁵⁹ In addition, requiring wage transparency, increasing access to affordable childcare, and implementing better family leave would address and narrow the gap.

Conclusion

As one set of researchers noted, "When a phenomenon,

such as the wage gap, can be explained by various factors, it does not mean the phenomenon doesn't exist. In fact, those explanations are the exact factors to look at when identifying interventions.⁶⁰ Actions to remove equal pay barriers will improve the lives of Utah's women, their families, and the economic wellbeing of all.

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Acknowledgement: Special thanks to Greg Knapp and John Linford for their research support and to Robbyn Scribner and Janika Dillion for their work on the previous version of this report. Also, thanks to our expert reviewers for their feedback: Carolina Núñez, Erin Jemison, April Townsend, Robbyn Scribner, Lecia Langston, and Chyleen Richey.

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