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## What Media Professionals Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

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# What Can I Do?

A SERIES TO HELP UTAHNS ENGAGE



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## What Media Professionals Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

**UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project**

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2020 gathering of 25 members of the media, including journalists, broadcasters, and producers. As powerful public voices, media professionals recognize they play a role both in educating the public and initiating important conversations. This discussion centered on how they could work in their specific roles to benefit women, both within the public sphere and in their own news organizations.

### CULTURE

Though the role of a journalist is to report about the world objectively, the very nature of public media puts these professionals in a visible and trusted position. In choosing which stories to tell and how to tell them, reporters and producers naturally influence attitudes and beliefs. Media professionals can positively impact women and girls in the broader culture as follows:

- Be intentional about creating content that is relevant to women; this includes more stories on “women’s issues,” but also a gender-informed perspective on any issue where gender may be relevant.
- Address controversial and/or sensitive topics that affect women disproportionately, including sexual harassment and assault, domestic violence, body image, and mental health concerns; these issues cannot be battled effectively if they are treated as taboo; it is also critical to broaden the scope by reporting boys’ and men’s experiences with these issues.

- Avoid the temptation to focus exclusively on challenges or controversies; be proactive and incorporate positive storytelling about women’s lives.
- Recognize and capitalize on the ways female media professionals can be public role models; their leadership will raise the status of women in the eyes of their broader audience.

### EXPANDED REPRESENTATION

One of the challenges facing many women in Utah is an inability to imagine opportunities for growth and leadership (i.e., “You can’t be what you can’t see”). Media professionals are uniquely positioned to raise public awareness of women who are defying stereotypes. Further, they can expand the definition of whose stories are deemed worth telling and which experts are worth listening to. These professionals can address the prevailing trend of narrow media representation by doing the following:

- Find and tell more stories about women who are making a difference and leading in their homes, neighborhoods, churches, businesses, and communities; a positive spotlight on adult women can have a powerful effect on young women and girls.
- Look beyond the traditional or typical, in addition to what may be familiar, when telling women’s stories.

- Use deliberate strategies to diversify expert sources and witnesses for news stories (databases and tracking can ensure new sources are being consulted); expand networks and ask the question "Who else should I be talking to about this?"
- Identify whose stories and viewpoints are being overlooked in general news coverage (e.g., women of color, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants); all community members benefit from seeing and hearing about those who look like them.
- Seek out and present voices and viewpoints that differ or dissent from mainstream cultural views.
- Create online communities or groups (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Slack) where women can seek advice and support from others.
- Be proactive in seeking out high potential employees who may struggle to find natural mentors, including women of color and others who have been underrepresented in the industry.
- Invest in critical professional development training for women (e.g., crucial conversations, creative negotiation, networking, career planning, personal branding, and self-advocacy).
- Engage male allies as mentors; identify influential and well-connected individuals within organizations and teach women how to form and leverage these critical relationships.

## UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Everyone has unconscious biases, which can be either confirmed or challenged by news coverage. Members of the media can positively influence their communities in ways that support those often harmed by bias (including women), by identifying biases within themselves, their organizations, and the broader society:

- Ask for organization-wide unconscious bias training at all levels; bias can't be addressed unless it is first acknowledged and then explored.
- Consider using an external consultant to conduct a thorough cultural assessment of institutionalized unconscious bias.
- Identify and work to reduce existing organizational gender gaps in pay, prestige, promotion, influence, and leadership.
- Develop a list of questions/challenges to consider when pitching or producing a story: Why are we covering this story? Whose perspectives are we missing? What are our blindspots? Who else should we talk to?
- Produce content from a wide variety of perspectives with the goal of challenging audience members to assess and rethink their own biases.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The news media is known to be a highly competitive industry, and though many women work in entry- and some mid-level positions, few women make it to top levels of management. Successful media professionals recognize the value that comes when more women are decision-makers and influencers. They can promote professional success among their female colleagues by doing the following:

- Create formal mentoring programs, including those focused specifically on identifying, nurturing, and advancing female talent.
- Educate young professionals about the many varying career pathways within the industry, both public and behind-the-scenes roles.
- Work to inspire the next generation of female journalists and broadcasters; mentor student interns and model/teach professional characteristics such as a strong work ethic, reliability, integrity, composure, and a willingness to take and implement feedback.
- Look up, down, and sideways when identifying potential developmental relationships; generations can learn much from each other.

## WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

The high-pressure environment of the newsroom may affect women employees disproportionately, as they are often the ones carrying a higher burden of unpaid work. Further, as public figures, members of the media face heightened workplace challenges, including harassment and safety issues. Media professionals working at all levels of an organization can make efforts to create a work environment where women can thrive:

- Question the prevailing mindset that news always comes first and employees come last; advocate for a workplace that supports employees' needs and long-term wellbeing, and reject the notion that media professionals are expendable.
- Advocate for policies that benefit women, including flexibility, childcare, family leave, and remote or part-time opportunities.
- Create comprehensive strategies that will both protect and empower female employees in the public eye as they encounter harassment and other threatening behaviors at work.
- Enforce strict policies that prohibit personal comments about employees on public social media channels; show explicit support for those who are targeted; block and report offending individuals or groups.
- Speak out against sexism in the industry, especially as it intersects with appearance and aging.
- Reject the scarcity mentality that causes women to see each other as competition for the few "women's spots."
- Build news corporations that are more diverse by deliberately attracting, recruiting, and retaining more women, including women of color and those from varying backgrounds and life experiences.

## CONCLUSION

Media professionals are some of the most recognizable and trusted voices in Utah, and many wish to use their voices to amplify those that have traditionally been underrepresented in the public sphere. As these members of the media initiate important conversations and raise awareness of critical issues, they can improve the wellbeing of women within their own organizations, while also strengthening the impact of all girls and women throughout the state.

Utah Women & Leadership Project • [www.utwomen.org](http://www.utwomen.org) • [uwlp@usu.edu](mailto:uwlp@usu.edu)

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