

The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Career Advancement Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 has impacted every Utahn in significant ways. Yet, research has found that women have been even more negatively impacted than men. For example, nearly 3 million American women have left the labor force over the past year and not returned.¹ In Utah, from 2019 to 2020, jobs held by women declined at more than twice the rate of men.² In addition, many studies have found that, for American couples, there continue to be gender gaps in household responsibilities even if both individuals work full-time.³ The Institute for Women’s Policy Research⁴ reported that women, and particularly women of color, have had greater struggles with managing paid work, caregiving responsibilities, and other types of unpaid obligations. Finally, at least one study found that working remotely has benefited men’s careers while halting women’s advancement.⁵

Understanding the career advancement challenges US women have faced this past year is important in terms of ensuring a more equitable recovery. Yet, we know that Utah women often face additional, unique struggles that are important to recognize and address. To better understand Utah women’s experiences, Utah Women & Leadership Project (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 or 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. The 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 second in a series of related reports being released in 2021; the first focused on changes, burnout, and hope. It is the first to analyze the extensive qualitative data collected and will highlight the qualitative analysis results of an open-ended question from the survey related to the impacts of COVID-19 on career advancement.

Study Background

An online survey instrument was administered to a non-probability sample of Utah women representing different settings, 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 a 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 assisted in disseminating the survey to their employees and contacts. Additionally, targeted recruitment efforts were made throughout the state to improve representation from women of different demographics and geography, 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, with 2,744 responding to at least one of four open-ended questions. The demographics for survey participants who responded to qualitative items are summarized in Table 1. It is 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.

Table 1: Qualitative Participant Demographics

<i>Age:</i> 20–29 (16.8%), 30–39, (28.7%), 40–49 (27.6%), 50–59 (18.6%), 60–69 (7.4%), 70+ (0.9%)
<i>Marital Status:</i> married (69.5%), single (15.4%), separated/divorced (8.9%), domestic partner (5.1%), widowed (1.0%)
<i>Education:</i> some high school or less (0.2%), high school diploma (2.8%), some college (14.5%), associate degree (6.1%), bachelor’s degree (35.8%), graduate degree (40.6%)
<i>Ethnicity:</i> White (87.5%), Hispanic/Latina (4.3%), More than One Race (4.3%), Asian (1.2%), American Indian (0.8%), Other (0.8%), Black (0.7%), Pacific Islander (0.4%),
<i>County:</i> Salt Lake (39.3%), Utah County (17.6%), Box Elder/Cache/Rich (9.7%), Davis/Morgan (9.2%), Weber (6.2%), Washington (4.4%), Carbon/Emery/Grand/San Juan (3.6%), Summit/Wasatch (2.7%), Kane/Iron/Beaver/Garfield (2.1%), Daggett/Duchesne/Uintah (2.0%), Juab/Millard/Plute/Sanpete/Sevier/Wayne (1.8%), Tooele (1.4%)
<i>Industry:</i> Education (33.6%), Nonprofit (11.6%), Government (10.8%), Healthcare (10.2%), Other (7.1%), Professional Services (6.8%), Information Technology (6.7%), Financial Services (4.3%), Sales (2.8%), Construction (1.5%), Food Services (1.2%), Hospitality and Tourism (1.2%), Manufacturing (1.2%), Transportation (1.0%)
<i>Job Type:</i> Front Line (31.6%), Team Lead/Supervisor (14.9%), Professional (27.7%), Manager/Director (20.0%), 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.

Overview of Findings

This brief explores the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Utah women’s career advancement through

analysis of data collected from the 2,564 survey participants who responded to the open-ended question, “How has the pandemic impacted your career advancement experiences and opportunities over the short term and longer term?” The responses were coded and analyzed for major themes and sub-themes. Because more than one code could be applied to the same comment, percentages reported do not add up to 100. Select comments are included that exemplify themes.

For some respondents (13.4%), the pandemic afforded them opportunities for advancement that otherwise would not have existed, and others (27.5%) said the pandemic did not affect their career advancement at all. Yet, that does not necessarily mean the pandemic has been easy to endure. The data shared in this brief cover the 59.1% of respondents who described a negative effect on their career advancement. These effects range from mild to severe, yet they may all have longer-term implications on women’s career advancement. This brief will describe women missing out on pay raises, declining promotions, being fearful of looking for a better fit, and reevaluating their current career, mostly due to unsupportive employers and being employed in particularly affected industries. Other women have faced more severe effects such as enduring job loss and having to start over from the ground up due to minimal opportunity in their various fields. Although some of these effects are likely not gender specific and could have been experienced by anyone, we know from national research⁷ that women are more likely to be in industries negatively affected by the pandemic and also more likely to have made career sacrifices to focus on caregiving responsibilities. Analysis of the data uncovered four primary themes: Everything Is on Hold, Lost or Relinquished Opportunity, Reevaluation of Career, and Experiences by Various Characteristics.

Theme #1: “Everything Is on Hold”

For the women who experienced a negative effect on their career advancement, the most oft-cited negative sentiment (61.4%) was that any opportunity to advance their career was put on hold because of the pandemic. In fact, 21.9% of these respondents specifically mentioned that the pandemic felt like a “wasted year” with less opportunity for career advancement. Another 7.6% cited the uncertainty that brings. As one woman stated, “It feels as though the pandemic has been a large ‘HOLD’ button on career advancement. Until it is over, it feels like survival.” Another participant reflected, “I’m so focused on dealing with the daily upheaval that I can’t even comprehend what career advancement experiences would look like. Everything seems to be on hold.” The corresponding implications mentioned by respondents revealed four sub-themes: the impact of lack of face-to-face time, increased work responsibility without increased pay, no raises or opportunity for advancement, and that women want change, but feel it is too risky.

1. Impact of Lack of Face-to-Face Time: For 9.9% of the respondents, in-person interactions were critical to ad-

vancement opportunities, whether it was networking, brainstorming, learning from or cultivating relationships with supervisors and colleagues, fostering mentorships, being seen as available and willing to take on projects, or having the opportunity to impress with current work. Women respondents believed their career advancement had suffered because of these missing opportunities, as working from home meant an inability to “shine” and impress. They lacked the networking opportunities that come with more in-person interaction.

For example, one participant stated, “I can’t get the one-on-one mentoring that would speed advancement up.” Another explained, “The lack of informal connection with colleagues across the organization has hampered my ability to network, explore new areas of the company, and facilitate growth.” In addition, one woman indicated, “I felt that out of sight, out of mind was very evident. I feel that I am very behind now in positioning myself for any sort of advancement.” And a fourth clarified, “Being remote full time, it feels like I am not seen or heard, leading me to feel less valued and less likely to be considered for any other opportunities.” A final respondent concluded, “I have to jump at every opportunity to prove my worth and value, which is making me feel burned out.”

2. Increased Work Responsibility Without Increased Pay: Many respondents (8.4%) noted increased responsibility and expectations without increased compensation to match their output. This was especially true for teachers who often had to prepare both in-person and online lesson plans, engage in more one-on-one oversight of their students, and foster closer relationships with parents.

Some of the most telling quotations include the following: One woman stated, “A few employees had quit at my company, and, due to financial concerns, my company chose not to rehire for those positions and instead asked me to absorb their jobs without an increase in pay.” Another said, “I feel as though when the pandemic hit, the school district I work for decided to use that as an excuse to ‘assign’ more duties without asking and just expecting that ‘people need a job’ so much they’ll do anything. If anything, it has made me want to quit and change career paths beyond anything I can explain.” One respondent noted that “it has essentially tripled my workload by having to have in-person classes, curate an online course for the same classes that can be done at home, and hybridize my classes to make them possible to do regardless of situation, with no pay increase.” A final participant exclaimed, “Honestly, it’s been awful! I probably work twice as much as I did before. . . . My entire job has changed. I now have to take care of all Covid-related issues first before I can complete my typical work-tasks. I have been working late hours and all weekend just to do the bare minimum. I’m barely surviving.”

Additionally, some respondents mentioned being able to secure a promised improved title change at their company, but without the usual expected increased compensation. Hence, they were working harder without additional compensation to match output.

3. **No Raises or Opportunities for Advancement:** According to 6.7% of the respondents, many employers paused planned raises and promotions because of the economic uncertainty of the pandemic. Instead, employers focused on navigating the changing market and economy. Some women described opportunities for advancement that vanished though they were up for a promotion or role switch. Women described the long-term effects this will have on their career paths and even their retirement plans.

For instance, one woman said, “Due to the pandemic and remote work, expected promotions were postponed indefinitely along with the pay increase that was expected with it. I have experienced a disconnect with my employer on many levels.” A second stated, “Advancement opportunities for both short and long term in my current job are no longer an option because of expected budget cuts, hiring freezes, and freezes on new job creations. I was a very good candidate for a job that would be created in the next year that will not be created any time soon.” Another simply responded, “No wage increases will impact my long-term retirement benefits,” while another reflected that she had “worked very hard producing new things the year before and would have received a merit raise. Due to the pandemic was told you’re lucky you have a job.” And finally, one participant exclaimed, “My request for a raise was rejected. I get paid \$1700 a month with a master’s degree, and every time I try to advocate for myself, I hear ‘be happy you have a job these days.’”

4. **Want Change, But Too Risky:** Finally, 4.3% of the respondents were unhappy in their position but felt stuck because of uncertainty of the economy and the potential risk of leaving solid employment. This means women were delaying the pursuit of beneficial career changes. Some wanted to change jobs because they were disappointed in how their employer had approached the pandemic, they felt overworked, or they had a plan pre-pandemic that was delayed.

For example, one participant stated, “I had starting thinking about looking for other career opportunities, but since the pandemic started, I have felt a need to be ‘safe’ and keep my current job instead of ‘risking’ losing what I have and not finding anything.” Another simply stated, “I feel I am trying to get through the uncertainties of the pandemic before I try exploring new professional endeavors.” A third responded, “I feel very stuck right now. Because of my increased childcare and schooling responsibilities, I feel lucky to just keep up with my increased workload. I don’t feel like it’s safe to pursue new opportunities right now.” Another woman explained, “I’m so burned out with trying to care for my baby and work from home that I’m considering quitting entirely, which was not the plan before. I would like to find a better job

at some point, but I feel stuck where I am thanks to the uncertain economy.” A sense of fear also emerged in this statement: “I want to look for a job that will help me advance my career. I am afraid to make any moves and not being able to pay my bills. This impacts my long-term career goals.” And finally, a study participant concluded, “I have been contemplating moving on to a higher-paying job for a while, but the pandemic has put all those ideas on hold.”

Theme #2: “Lost or Relinquished Opportunity”

The second major theme that emerged focused on women who had lost work, pay, or their business, or had sacrificed opportunities to advance their career (29.7% of those who experienced a negative effect to career advancement). In some cases, this was because of the precarious economy. For others, increased responsibility at home meant less time and bandwidth for new responsibilities, opportunities, and expectations. Some Utah women described a decline in mental health as the barrier to advancement, while others said these losses left them starting from scratch. As one participant noted, “I have had to give up advancement opportunities because I can barely manage what I am doing already.”

In all, the following six subthemes emerged: lost work, sacrificing advancement for family, forgoing planned education, performing only the bare minimum, the mental health barrier to advancement, and moving backwards.

1. **Lost Work:** Overall, 10.8% of respondents saw their businesses suffer or close, lost their jobs, or lost work or pay. For those who felt fortunate enough to find another means of income, doing so sometimes meant finding a potentially irrelevant or lower-paying job and thus constituted a definite career disruption.

In terms of business impacts, one woman simply stated, “I had to shut down my business completely and find a full-time job.” Another said, “I own my own business. I now work at least twice as hard for half or less of the previous yield. I often work without pay to ensure I can pay others who help with our business and keep our program running.” A third woman noted, “I had to lay off half the company. I asked employees to take pay cuts as well, including myself. We had to change how we do business to survive.” One respondent explained that “the salon industry has lost at least 50% of their business, and we are low on labor hours because so many women left the industry.” A childcare provider shared, “I do in home childcare, and I lost almost all of my kids. Parents are working from home and keeping their kids home. I cannot work outside the home because I am raising three grandchildren and can’t afford outside care.”

Other participants discussed their transitions. One stated, “In the job I lost because of the pandemic, I was about to be promoted and moved to a new position, but never got the chance.” Another said, “I lost contracts with clients and went back to a full-time job working for someone else.” A third shared, “My long-term goal had been to

move my preschool out of my home and into a commercial building. The pandemic stopped my preschool and made us more financially unstable, decreasing my chances of starting my own business. It's made me wary of starting my own business and inheriting those risks." And, finally, another woman stated, "I won't be able to last another year in my consulting, event, and speaking business if COVID-19 closures remain throughout the year."

2. **Sacrificing Advancement for Family:** Many Utah women who responded to our survey mentioned the challenge of working while having children at home and/or the additional responsibility of homeschooling while also keeping up with work responsibilities. One participant noted, this additional burden could "stunt my career growth for a few years." Another mother stated, "Covid has not changed [career advancement] for me. Caregiving has."

In terms of participants who experienced a negative effect on their career advancement specifically, 7.5% gave up promotions, raises, and other opportunities that would have furthered their careers. As one woman stated, "I'm more focused on the flexibility offered by my employer than opportunities for advancement. I was a director but took a manager position because I needed to be available more to my children." Another shared, "I am hesitant to accept opportunities for advancement due to concern that I won't be able to manage increased responsibilities at work in addition to family responsibilities." Another explained, "I believe it has greatly impacted my career goals. I find myself taking on less technically complex projects as my coworkers because I hesitate to pile on too much work given the uncertainty of our daycare situation. I also can't be as available as my coworkers, which makes me feel like I will be passed over when promotions are available." And finally, one mother reflected, "I was planning on leaving my current employer to pursue a career change as an analyst. That is no longer an option because I need more flexibility in my work schedule with all the changes to school schedules for my children."

Other participants discussed how they believe their opportunities for advancement have been impacted. For example, one respondent explained, "I think that [the pandemic] puts me into a vulnerable position to be overlooked as childcare needs are always a concern for management." Another stated, "I have had to work part time instead of full time to avoid putting my kids in childcare, which means I don't have another option for health insurance, tuition benefits, retirement, insurance, or other benefits. It's hard to be promoted when you can only work part time." While another woman shared that "decreasing my work hours to care for my children meant sacrificing the eligibility I was working toward for health and dental insurance and the company 401k program." A final respondent summed up her experience in this way, "I have put career goals entirely on hold. My focus right

now is one day at a time, making sure my kids pass their current grade."

3. **Forgoing Planned Education:** 7.3% of respondents reported delaying their education for reasons ranging from economic uncertainty, mental health concerns, increased responsibility at home, and costs related to acquiring further education. For many, continuing their education was key to future career advancement.

For example, one woman stated, "I was thinking of going back to school for a graduate degree, but with the increased stress and uncertainty of the pandemic, I placed this goal on the back burner." Another explained, "I cannot attend classes to start my career, and I estimate I will be 2–4 years behind my planned start date because of the pandemic." A third said, "The pandemic has made it impossible for me to be able to do night classes due to the fact I have to stay home with my children. We used to have grandparents watch them after school, but it is now too risky." One simply stated, "I decided to take spring semester off because I was burnt out and won't be able to finish school until later." While another participant noted, "I was planning on applying for graduate school this fall but have put that on hold indefinitely."

4. **Only Able to Perform the Bare Minimum:** In our overall sample of respondents who participated in all open-ended questions, more than 1 in 3 women felt that COVID-19 caused a mental health toll or increased stress, with about 1 in 5 saying it was harder to do their job during the pandemic and about 1 in 9 specifically mentioning fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout. In terms of those who experienced a negative effect to career advancement specifically, 4.2% mentioned being able to meet only the bare minimum standards of their position because of additional stress and responsibility at home.

For instance, one woman said, "This has been probably the year of my life where I've had the least energetic output of all time." Another stated, "Most of 2020 was spent in survival mode. I feel like I'm starting to recover, but it will take time before I'm fully thriving again." A third mentioned that "working from home is very difficult with small children, so the quality of my work has suffered a lot. It has affected my self-image as a mother and worker. I feel like I'm not doing a sufficient job in either area, and that has impacted my mental health." Another respondent shared, "Honestly, I don't have the mental space to think beyond the present. I find myself uninterested in trying to advance or come up with the next step." While a final woman exclaimed, "Advancement? Ha. I'm lucky to have the motivation to make it to work in the morning. I don't have the energy to think about change."

5. **The Mental Health Barrier to Advancement:** The next subtheme in the "Lost or Forgone Opportunity" category focused on declining mental health as a barrier to ad-

vancement. Although we saw this emerge in other areas, we felt it was important to highlight as it indicates the impact increased stress may have on women's career advancement. For example, one stated, "I felt that I had to choose between my career or my mental/physical health during the pandemic," while another questioned whether the money was worth the emotional stress she dealt with every day. She said, "I was not thinking of opportunities. I was only thinking of surviving every day." Another example from one participant included this statement, "Before March 2020 I was feeling energetic about my work and eagerly looking forward to future projects. I have completely changed to the opposite: when this project is done, I am going to take a long break from working, as long as we can afford it." Hopelessness was also a concern as one woman stated, "Due to stress and uncertainty in general, I stopped considering any career advancement, and now no longer care about long term advancement either. It'd have been an uphill battle at the best of times, and I don't have the strength to fight what I perceive as a lost cause."

6. **Moving Backwards:** Some respondents described the barriers to career advancement in extreme terms, feeling like they were moving backwards or were even forced to start their careers over. As one stated, "I had to completely start over at an entry level job." Another participant explained, "I had to start over at the bottom of a new company. My trajectory to office manager was completely cut off." One woman simply stated, "Advancement came to a dead stop and in fact I have gone 10 steps backwards." This theme showed up in another statement, "Due to homeschooling demands and childcare issues I had to postpone my plans to pursue a full-time position. I now work at the same position I held before starting my studies and work on weekends so that I can support my family both financially and academically." Finally, one survey respondent proclaimed, "The pandemic has halted any progress or sense of fulfillment from my role. Many roles I believed to have 'moved past' have now become my responsibility again due to decreased staffing."

Theme #3: "Reevaluation of Career"

According to 18% of the respondents who experienced a negative effect to career advancement, the COVID-19 pandemic caused them to reevaluate their current position and career path where they may not have without the pandemic experience. No matter the reason, reevaluation may result in career disruptions with financial implications. One respondent simply stated, "Significant burnout has led me to consider changing careers." Analysis of the data showed that 10.4% of respondents indicated the pandemic has prompted them to reevaluate their current situation, while 9.4% said either they had already or have now planned to switch industries or careers. For some, it was because of how their specific industry had fared in the pandemic, and others wanted to find more supportive employers. Some participants realized they want to go back to school, while others decided to leave the workforce altogether. Overall, the three subthemes presented here in-

clude changes that are industry-specific, changes that were sparked by unsupportive employers, and changes that result from general reflection and reevaluation.

1. **Industry-Specific Concerns:** Of those reevaluating respondents, 19.8% did or wanted to switch industries because of how their industry fared or handled the pandemic. For instance, one woman stated, "I had to change my career path completely. The hospitality world will not recover from the pandemic for a long time, and I could not wait for it to bounce back to start working again." Another participant explained, "The unpredictability of the public from low to extreme this past year has made me think about moving out of retail due to burnout even though I've been doing it for 30 years." A few simply stated, "I'm not sure if I want to continue being in education with all this stress," and "It just makes me want to get out of healthcare faster." Finally, one educator shared, "Honestly, it has made me want to quit. My local school board has not prioritized the safety of teachers at all. I feel like I'm part of an experiment, being thrown back into a classroom with little precautions."
2. **Unsupportive Employers:** Reevaluating respondents (16.1%) also mentioned they decided to make a change because they did not feel supported by their employers, either resulting from a lack of family-friendly policies or unrealistic expectations during a challenging year. For example, one woman said, "I don't expect to advance within my company because I intend to find an arrangement that will allow me to work the large majority of the time from home. I don't see my current leadership being on board with this plan, so I will likely have to change companies to get the position that allows for this arrangement." A second explained, "I am considering taking a step back at this time to better support my child's education and emotional needs. This has been a very difficult decision . . . when I am on a great path, but unfortunately my employer does not provide support for me as a mother to grow in my career and support the needs of my family." Finally, one participant stated, "Because of the pandemic and my employer's response, I am actively seeking new work in a less demanding environment. I anticipate taking a significant pay cut, immediately and over the course of my career as a result."
3. **General Reevaluation:** Additional reasons for career reevaluation varied. Some respondents realized they should pursue additional education, others saw a holistic shift of priorities in their lives, while additional participants realized they no longer wanted to work. One woman plainly stated, "I realize I need to get higher education." Another explained, "I find myself questioning if my short- and long-term goals are even an option anymore. I don't know what to expect in the coming year, let alone the next five." A third said that "it has encouraged me to think outside the box and try to pursue other opportunities in order to advance my career," while another participant explained, "I felt often that the pandemic made me question priorities when it came to work, fi-

nances, and family.” A final example included, “I’m thinking of quitting and just staying home in the future if that becomes a viable option.”

Theme #4: Experiences by Characteristics

The final primary theme that emerged from the analysis relates to unique experiences women faced. The subthemes revolve around the following three areas: women facing different challenges at work from those of their male counterparts, women of color facing different challenges than their white female or male colleagues, and the differences in challenges between women starting out in their careers and women in later career stages.

1. **Women Face Different Challenges:** Although it might be obvious from previous sections, many women specifically noted that they faced different challenges from those of their male counterparts at work. For example, one respondent stated, “If you’re a female you have to do your job 10000%, plus figure out who is going to teach your kids and do all the things at home.” Another explained, “I watched as a coworker with less experience and seniority was promoted over me because he is married and can devote ‘more time’ to his job, even though I work more hours and have taken on extra responsibilities and he has not.” In terms of remote working, one woman said, “Children at home default to asking mom for everything even though Dad is also working from home and able (and willing!) to help. I feel guilty most of the day telling my child that ‘Mom needs to work right now.’”

Three additional participants shared insights that represent many women’s experiences: First, one said, “The worry that male peers can take on more while I am barely sustaining creates concern about future growth opportunities. I worry about short- and long-term opportunities being lost, and it impacts how I feel about my current role.” Second, one woman noted, “If it becomes safe to have childcare for our son, then I may be able to carve out more time for meetings, networking opportunities, conferences and symposia. It is already evident that my male counterparts are much better able to manage their time and submit proposals at a faster rate than I am able to.” And finally, this respondent shared her experience, “My work anxiety with regard to being ‘seen’ and included as a female has risen significantly since the pandemic. I have always felt marginalized, but now this feeling is compacted with a physical distance from leadership as well as the immense need to juggle homeschooling, chores, and the mental health needs of my children with work. I have rarely felt understood by my male bosses, but this gap in empathy is huge right now.”

2. **Women of Color:** Research has clearly noted that women of color have been disproportionately impacted in many ways by the pandemic. For example, one participant stated, “Women of color continue to have to work 10 times

harder in the workplace to be considered for promotion. I am hopeful that one day the playing field will be more leveled, and I am committed to be a role model for change especially in a white-male dominated workforce.” Another simply said, “The pandemic continues to impact the lack of opportunities that my company offers for women of color.” While a third plans to move from Utah altogether: “Due to the pandemic and the resulting schism caused by the election, I have made the choice to move out of Utah. I do not feel safe living in Utah, nor do I feel that the state or the community in which I live can support me or anyone that identifies as ‘other.’ I know leaving Utah and its tech-hub industry can and will negatively impact the trajectory of my career.”

Two additional quotations also described the specific impacts for women of color in Utah. One woman explained, “I found that my supervisor was less supportive of me, as a woman of color, compared to my peers. I was being overworked, undervalued, and minimized. . . . I was repeatedly told that I should be more positive and optimistic regarding the pandemic and gaslighted when I brought up concerns over my safety and the safety of [my team]. After 6 months of struggling to stand my ground, I chose to resign from my position and switched to a temporary position working from home.” The second woman described her situation as follows: “Since some of my family members are undocumented, they were left without work and I had to step in to support them financially. I took care of my father and brother with disabilities through a great portion of the year. Since both are in high-risk, vulnerable populations, the challenges presented to me at work were made to be even more significant. This financial stress, concern over my family’s health, mixed in with the poor work environment, led me to make the difficult decision to leave my professional field for temporary work in an adjacent field. I worry that this could have significant impact on my career goals.”

3. **Emerging Versus Later-Career Differences:** Finally, there were some differences in the impact of COVID-19 on women’s early- versus later-career advancement challenges. In terms of early-career, three statements are instructive: First, one woman stated, “I’m very worried about my chances at finding an internship this summer which could impact my future career. I also think I’m getting less information about organizations/events/career fairs I should be attending because I spend less time on campus.” Another said, “Unfortunately, I was hoping to gain experience in my chosen field through internships but the opportunities I applied for were cancelled.” And a final individual entering the job market with a Ph.D. explained, “I graduated with a PhD in STEM in 2019 and took a temporary job substitute teaching K–12 while applying for something more long term. Since then, hiring has severely slowed in an already over-

crowded field. I'm now pursuing employment in an area outside the field I have spent the last decade training in."

In terms of later-stage career challenges, one woman replied, "Industries are even more hesitant to hire workers over 50 now." While another said, "I had been with my employer over 10 years and planned to retire from there [but was laid off]. I now am struggling to be hired as an 'older' woman in the workforce." A third stated, "I don't ever expect to move forward in my career after this. I am 58. I see no opportunities to recover the lost time. I have been passed over repeatedly for jobs I was qualified for because of my age and gender." Yet another participant shared her situation as follows: "At 58, my options for finding new suitable employment are slim when unemployment is high because of the pandemic. For me, the pandemic has impacted my income for the rest of my life, not just the duration of the pandemic. It has effectively ended my employment status for the future." And a final participant added this view, "I am 64 years old, loved my job, and wanted to work 1–2 more years. But with the pandemic, I wanted to minimize my risks and felt I needed to retire. I will now pay for my health insurance until I am 65 and my income has decreased. I will get by but am sad to have left a job I had for over 20 years."

Recommendations & Conclusion

Overall, many Utah women have explained that, for numerous reasons, they believe their career advancement trajectories have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. For some, this was employer related, such as paused raises and promotions because of economic uncertainty. For others, the stall was related to limitations imposed by remote work, such as lack of networking and inability to impress. Others felt they could not pursue opportunities like a promotion, a better job elsewhere, or furthering their education because of increased responsibility at home or declining mental health. And still others lost work, hours, or their business suffered. Clearly, the pandemic has had a profound impact on women at work, the effects of which may be felt for years to come. Yet there are many actions that can happen now to mitigate negative outcomes moving forward.

First, there is significant room for improvement in the support that organizations offer their employees. For example, flexible work arrangements, leave policies, and childcare support could be especially useful to many employees experiencing increased family responsibilities. The need for these policies did not start with the pandemic, but COVID-19 has heightened their utility, especially moving forward, to ensure women can effectively rebound and thrive. Research shows that offering family-friendly policies has a positive economic impact for the entire community, and it increases diversity, productivity, and job satisfaction for employees.⁸ Organizations can also actively recruit women who have left the workplace during the pandemic and implement long-term strategies for recruiting women who are returning to the workplace after career breaks.

Second, Utah state and local governments can implement policies that benefit women's recovery from the negative impact of COVID-19 and positively affect women in the future. These include implementing public policies that focus on narrowing the gender pay gap; increasing investment in training and upskilling opportunities that support women, including return-to-work initiatives; offering incentives that encourage businesses to implement family-friendly and inclusive policies; and providing more support for childcare offices and programs around the state.

This brief has summarized qualitative comments on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's career advancement. It was written to provide information useful for Utah governments, businesses, families, and individuals. The brief also calls to action Utah government, community, and business leaders to do more to understand the physical, behavioral, and emotional effects that Utah women are facing related to COVID-19. We encourage leaders to do more to implement strategies and facilitate communication to support the working women of Utah.

¹ Cerullo, M. (2021). *Nearly 3 million U.S. women have dropped out of the labor force in the past year*. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-crisis-3-million-women-labor-force/>

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

³ Barroso, A. (2021, January 25). *For American couples, gender gaps in sharing household responsibilities persist amid pandemic*. Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/25/for-american-couples-gender-gaps-in-sharing-household-responsibilities-persist-amid-pandemic/?utm%2E%80%A6>

⁴ Mason, C. N. (2021). *Build(ing) the future: Bold policies for a gender-equitable recovery*. Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/building-the-future/>

⁵ Rogers, B. (2020). *Not in the same boat: Career progression in the pandemic*. *Qualtrics Blog*. <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/inequitable-effects-of-pandemic-on-careers/>

⁶ While this sampling design was a combination of nonprobability sampling techniques (i.e., convenience sampling, snowball sampling, expert judgment 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 Alon, T., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J., & Tertilt, M. (2020). *This time it's different: The role of women's employment in a pandemic recession*. National Bureau of Economic Research. https://cepr.org/active/publications/discussion_papers/dp.php?dpno=15149#

⁸ Scribner, R., Vargas, M., & Madsen, S. R. (2020, December 2). *Flexible and family-friendly policies at Utah's "Best Places to Work."* <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/27-flexible-family-friendly-policies-utah-best-places-to-work.pdf>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2020, February 28). *Untapped potential: Economic impact of childcare breakdowns of U.S. states*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/reports/untapped-potential-economic-impact-childcare-breakdowns-us-states>

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