

## The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Caregiver Experiences

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21 has affected workers across the globe, and women in the workforce have been disproportionately impacted, including those who live in Utah. 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.<sup>1</sup> One major reason for these discrepancies is likely the disproportionate burden women have carried for childcare and homeschooling children as daycare facilities and schools have been closed in efforts to curb the spread of the virus. In fact, one national report<sup>2</sup> stated that mothers in dual-income households were three times more likely than fathers to bear the main responsibility for most of the housework and childcare.

Previous [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) (UWLP) studies have found that Utah women do experience at least some challenges differently from women nationally. Hence, to better understand these experiences, researchers conducted an extensive, in-depth survey to understand the impact of COVID-19 on Utah 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 objective was to understand more clearly the experiences of Utah women as they have navigated paid work during the pandemic. This comprehensive study collected 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 fourth in a six-part series on the impact of COVID-19 on Utah women and work.<sup>3</sup> It expands upon the quantitative findings from the third brief ("[No. 33: Childcare and Homeschooling](#)"). In this brief, we focus on qualitative findings regarding care work experiences—including caring for people other than one's own children, such as grandchildren, older relatives, other family members, and those providing care in the childcare industry—during the pandemic more broadly and shares findings from open-ended questions that were not childcare or care work specific, meaning these issues emerged from broader, more generalized questions.

### Study Background & Overview

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 par-

ticipants was announced through the UWLP monthly newsletter, social media platforms, and website. In addition, the 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 to include women of all demographics throughout the state, including providing the survey in both English and Spanish (see design information in past briefs).

Overall, 3,542 Utah women completed the survey, with 2,744 responding to at least one of the four open-ended questions. The demographics and limitations for survey participants who responded to qualitative items are summarized in Table 1 in a previous brief titled "[No. 32: The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Career Advancement Challenges](#)." Of the 2,713 participants who responded to the open-ended question, "How has the pandemic impacted your work experience?" 20.3% specifically mentioned challenges that come with being a parent with children in the home during the pandemic. Additionally, childcare and care work challenges were mentioned by 17.2% of respondents, all of which are covered in this report. Percentages reported in this brief are shares of those who mentioned challenges having children at home or who were care workers during the pandemic (N=803). The responses were coded and analyzed for major themes and subthemes. Select comments are included in the narrative that exemplify responses within the following categories: Impacts on Working Mothers, Childcare Challenges, and Caregiving Responsibilities Beyond Children.

### Impacts on Working Mothers

Overall, working women with children of all ages faced challenges during the pandemic. When schools were closed for in-person learning, mothers felt pressure to ensure their children were engaged and caught up with their schoolwork while also trying to be productive employees. Younger children who required more supervision made it even harder to maintain work-life boundaries. Despite the child's age, however, respondents fit work hours late into the night and reported having little to no downtime as they were either working for pay, caring for their children, or doing housework. In this section, five primary themes emerged around the impacts of the pandemic on mothers: the struggle to juggle, workplace support, spousal support, guilt, and unique impacts on single mothers.

1. **The Struggle to Juggle:** Of caretaker respondents, 73.2% reported difficulty managing both their home and work responsibilities. As one mother lamented, “It seems like I am never balancing both childcare duties and work duties effectively.” Because respondents were managing their own work schedule as well as their children’s school schedules, they found they were working whenever they could find time in their schedules; often these were odd hours that sometimes extended late into the night after the kids went to sleep. One mother elaborated, “Working from home instead of my office has been immensely challenging with the added responsibility of making sure my child is doing schoolwork and keeping on task. With this shift, I also find myself working more late hours just to keep up on the work, since there are so many interruptions during the day. This translates to household tasks not getting done, since I’m working during the time I would normally be taking care of these things.”

*“It seems like I am never balancing both childcare duties and work duties effectively.”*

Because of the extra responsibility of having children at home with the additional interruptions throughout the day, respondents with children found they were working longer hours than they did before the pandemic. One respondent explained, “It is much more stressful working from home with my kids also having school from home. I have had difficulty keeping everyone on a schedule. When I am helping kids at home and working, I end up doing work late into the night to keep up with everything. I have blurred my work schedule with my home schedule and feel that there is no more downtime available.” Another woman explained, “It was impossible to juggle work and homeschool. I ended up working every second of the day I wasn’t taking care of kids. It was an impossible ask of parents, specifically moms.”

Women with children living in the home felt their experiences were more challenging than those who did not. As one study participant noted, “It is great to save money on childcare, but it has been difficult to entertain kids ([ages]10 and 11). Now that they have online school, they need frequent help and lots of food. It has been difficult to focus on work and be productive. I feel disadvantaged compared to kids-free and married co-workers.” The pressure that mothers felt led some working mothers to reassess whether to continue working. For example, one respondent said, “Balancing a full-time job and homeschooling was incredibly hard. There have been many times that I thought about going part-time or quitting altogether.” Another respondent had a similar thought and expanded on the mental and physical health toll: “The hours that were involved were extremely tiring. I have several children at home, and they needed me to be present for them. I felt pulled in so many directions that I was struggling to

*“I feel guilty most of the day telling my child that ‘mom needs to work right now.’”*

survive. It was hard to give my all to work all the time and still be a good mother and wife. . . . I am more burned out than ever before. If I could afford to quit, I would. The stress is too much, and my body is starting to have issues.”

Some respondents were also navigating children’s struggles with mental and physical health. “My children, even my most introverted children, are isolated, bored, and terribly lonely. This means more pressure on me for entertainment, care, socialization and supervision, which I just cannot do.” Another said, “Managing three kids at home is very stressful. One has severe asthma, and we want to keep him safe. Older teen suffers from depression and has had behavioral issues through this.”

Overall, between working whenever they could, being interrupted, putting in extra hours, becoming full-time entertainers and coaches for their children, experiencing burnout, and navigating the mental and physical health of their children, thousands of Utah mothers experienced the “struggle to juggle” in ways that negatively impacted their work and home lives.

2. **Guilt:** Having had so many additional responsibilities and expectations piled on working parents’ shoulders, it is no surprise mothers felt like they were falling short and even failing on both fronts—home and work. This led to women having feelings of guilt, as was mentioned by 30.8% of respondents. Feelings of guilt were frequently mentioned alongside general mental health struggles (another 30% of the sample). As one mother simply stated, “I feel guilty most of the day telling my child that ‘mom needs to work right now.’”

It was apparent that adequately meeting everyone’s needs felt impossible to respondents, and in trying to do so, they ignored their own personal needs. For instance, one mother explained, “I find myself feeling guilty for not working as much as I should or for working too much and not being as present with my kids. It’s hard to find a balance, and it can be especially hard to find any extra time to for my own mental/physical health.” One female executive stated, “I worry that I’m not doing enough as a mom to ensure my kids aren’t falling behind in their academic development, but I have an overwhelming load at work every day and I just can’t do it all. I think my fellow executives (all men) have no idea what it’s like to attempt to homeschool four kids while still working productively.” Another woman noted, “Balancing work and home has been a losing battle. I like being home with my children, but I don’t feel like I give them the attention

they deserve due to work projects. Either the relationship with my children suffers or my productivity at work.”

Feelings of guilt arose in other ways as well. One mother resented the new educator expectation, “It’s been hard to not feel guilty for wanting my career and not wanting to be an in-home educator. I want my kids to feel supported, but my skillset is not teaching at home.” Another described how guilt led to other forms of mental health challenges, “I was distracted and definitely not as productive as usual. I felt like a crap Mom and a crap employee. My mental health suffered quite a bit and my anxiety skyrocketed.” A final example includes this profound story that exemplifies many of the themes discovered in the open-ended comments: “I’m crying while I’m saying this: I don’t think, as a woman, I’ll ever recover from this. My career stalled, financially ruined, frazzled and spread thin, and my children are behind socially or educationally. I feel like a ‘slacker’ when I attend to my family’s needs, and the emotional toll has broken my marriage because of serious inequality in unpaid labor. I guess this will be a scar on the rest of my life. I’ll never forget it.”

3. **Spousal Support:** Of the hundreds of working mothers in our sample, 22.4% discussed the support levels of their spouses, with 24.4% of those falling within a range of being “supportive,” while 75.6% discussed an unsupportive spouse.

*Supportive Spouse:* Even when women described having a supportive spouse, the increased responsibility for parents during the pandemic was overwhelming for many respondents. For example, one woman stated, “I have kids in high school, middle school, and elementary school. Trying to keep them on task and grades up while trying to do college myself has been a challenge. Yet, I have been one of the blessed ones to have kids and a husband to support and help out.” Another mother stated, “My husband now gets to work from home, and it is so nice to have some extra help! Not having to commute means he can pick up the kids while I make dinner. He can pick up the house a bit while he is listening to a meeting. We get so much more time together now and I love it so much.” Another woman in the labor force explained, “My husband is incredibly supportive of my goals and is a true partner in our home; he does all the grocery shopping, lots of cooking and cleaning, and made Christmas happen.”

*Unsupportive Spouse:* Hundreds of respondents discussed spouses who did not provide support at home, and these women often mentioned how additional caregiving and home responsibilities during the pandemic typically fell on women more generally. This included managing schoolwork, schedules, and general household tasks. In some cases, husbands had similar work responsibilities and capabilities to those of the mother, and in other cases, the spouse was unable to help due to their job. Here are examples from six Utah women:

<p>“My husband is a highly-trained working professional, but I feel for whatever reason the role of filling childcare gaps has fallen primarily on me. This has created a great deal of stress when attending and leading electronic meetings, with concerns of others questioning my professionalism when interruptions occur from my children. I feel embarrassed and completely without control of these situations.”</p>
<p>“It has been incredibly difficult (I cannot emphasize enough how difficult) to balance work hours and responsibilities with childcare and home responsibilities. My workday is now constantly interrupted with taking kids to school, picking kids up from school, and taking kids to activities and appointments. My husband has contributed much less in these ways since the pandemic started, and I often find myself working late to get my work hours in.”</p>
<p>“Childcare and other household chores/responsibilities fall greatly on me. I stress about productivity during work hours while also providing childcare. There seems to be no break, no transition or sense of work and non-work hours. It all just feels like work, every hour, and every day.”</p>
<p>“Trying to maintain my workload while homeschooling the kids and cooking and cleaning all day has been killing me. I feel like I have to work every minute that I’m not doing household/childcare work. I sacrifice sleep to be able to stay on top of my workload and meet deadlines. Many times, I get 4 hours or less a night. I ask my spouse for help and don’t get it. It’s been really rough.”</p>
<p>“The pandemic has definitely put greater stress on me, primarily because as soon as my kids were sent home for homeschool, all of that burden fell on me. I was working a full-time job. I also felt the strain of the kids’ emotional well-being as I tried to coach them through the isolation and change of routine, and all that emotional support fell on me. My husband found himself unemployed in 2020, so the financial burden and stress of supporting the household was on my shoulders.”</p>
<p>“My attention is now divided between work and an uneven distribution (between my husband and myself) of childcare responsibilities.”</p>

In some cases, the spouse’s employer was a contributor to the problem. For example, one participant explained, “I am married to a front-line health care worker and am the primary caretaker for our three children in addition to working full-time in an executive-level position. I have found it difficult to balance my responsibilities and managing our children and household without any support from my partner. My employer has been generous with time off and flexibility, but my partner’s employer has provided zero support.”

4. **Workplace Support:** Of the 18.7% of respondents with caretaker challenges who mentioned workplace support, 44.7% discussed supportive work environments, while 55.3% talked about their employer’s lack of support.

*Supportive Employers:* Many women who completed this survey felt supported by their direct supervisors or managers. For example, one respondent stated, “My boss and his boss are very involved fathers, and I never felt any kind of extra pressure or that they were unhappy with my performance. They understood. If I had a sexist boss, this could have had such a different outcome.” Another woman explained, “At my current place of work, my supervisor has been more than understanding and supportive of me as a mother and an employee, particularly in regard to what times I work and what days.” One working mother commented, “I’ve been very fortunate to have an understanding and flexible boss. She has been supportive of me balancing my work and family responsibilities. It’s helped alleviate a lot of stress associated with the pandemic. I am grateful to her.”

Some respondents realized how lucky they were to have supportive employers and workplaces more generally. For example, one respondent stated, “I am very grateful for my workplace. In the profession that I am in, if I had worked at other similar facilities, I am confident I would have had to leave my position completely to care for my child.” Another woman explained, “My workplace has been great regarding meeting our needs and flexibility; I

*“When we returned to work, my employer made no allowances for me. I was required to work more than twice as many hours as before the pandemic.”*

feel very lucky to have maintained my hours and pay. We were immediately set up to work from home where/when possible.”

*Unsupportive Employers:* Hundreds of women discovered that their employers were particularly unsupportive during the pandemic. For example, one respondent explained, “If anything, this pandemic truly showed me who I work for, and I no longer feel as passionate about being loyal and working as hard as I did before March.” Another said, “When we returned to work, my employer made no allowances for me. I was *required* to work more than twice as many hours as before the pandemic. I had to tell my kids’ teachers that they would not be doing their schoolwork because my husband and I had to work full-time.” Another working mother stated, “I am in a high-risk group and have felt marginalized and punished for needing to work remotely. In fact, I was pressured to return to work before my doctor said it was safe for me to do so. I caught COVID-19 and was pressured to get back to work in the office ASAP even though I was very sick.” Although some of these challenges were caused by individual bosses, negative treatment from male co-workers was also mentioned, particularly focusing on men who did not understand the emotional and physical load of unpaid care work.

Some participants left their companies during the pandemic for more understanding and accommodating employers. One mother remarked, “I switched to a job that is understanding, allows me to work 99% remote, and has very open conversations about how the pandemic is impacting people’s work life. So, I’m much happier in this new job.” Another stated, “It was very difficult to homeschool my child; through July 2020 my boss would not allow me to work from home until *he* was forced to by the CARES Act. I left that job and am now able to work from home.” Study respondents also shared the changes they wanted to see their employers make for them to consider staying. For example, one woman stated, “I would consider staying on at my employer if they offered a permanent work-from-home schedule, flexible hours, childcare support, and generally did not look down upon employees who did their best work outside of the traditional office. Many executives in Utah still don’t see value in changing policies that support both genders.”

5. Single Mothers: With less support and fewer options, single mothers were forced to manage the additional responsibilities already described. Here are stories from women who shared their challenges as single mothers:

“I’m a single mom with two young school-age kids. It is incredibly difficult to balance work and family demands. At least once or twice a week, I feel like I just can’t do both anymore. But that’s just not an option for me. I love my kids and I love my job. I’ve moved forward as best I can, but I’ve felt burned out for a long time, and I feel like my sleep and mental health have suffered. I have more anxiety, and I often find myself feeling like there’s just too much for one person. I sympathize with women who have quit. I would if it could.”

“I am a single mom of two young children, and the pandemic has made maintaining a work-life balance impossible. Last spring when schools closed, I spent most of my normal working hours homeschooling my kids and then stayed up most of the night to catch up on my work. I was getting 2–3 hours of sleep at night. If I would have had the financial support of a partner to be able to leave the workforce, I would have.”

“As an elementary teacher, we began teaching remotely. It was difficult teaching and trying to manage my own children’s education as a single mom. I felt like I never stopped working. After school hours I was grading, replying to emails, recording more lessons, trying to contact the students that were not participating.”

“Being a single mother during the pandemic meant that I lost my support system. Because he was continually exposed to COVID-19 in his job, their dad has gone weeks to a month between taking parent time. My parents helped me a lot before the pandemic, but they are the ones we are trying to protect, so we tried to keep away. I couldn’t get a sitter. It has all been on me.”

“I haven’t been able to properly adapt to my children’s changing needs (homeschool) because of pressure from my employer. I’m a single mother, and even though the entire world is dealing with extenuating circumstances, the attitude at my office is that I’m a mom and a single mom by choice, and I need to figure it out and get to work in the office every day from 9–5 no matter what.”

“I wish my immediate supervisor would be a little more understanding of the extreme stress I am under considering I am a single parent (zero help from other parent, financial or otherwise) with kids who are also home and also dealing with extreme stress.”

## Childcare Challenges

While federal funding existed during the pandemic to help childcare providers remain open, there was still a myriad of reasons why parents lost access to childcare during the pandemic and childcare centers fared poorly. In some cases, childcare providers closed temporarily to implement safety guidelines, which included decreased childcare slots upon reopening. Some parents had safety concerns and decided to keep their children home while still paying for their unused childcare slot to secure the option. Others faced financial setbacks and could no longer afford childcare, so providers faced decreased enrollment and found it hard to retain staff. Interestingly, only two respondents mentioned having access to childcare through their employer. During the analysis of these data, two primary themes emerged: challenges accessing childcare, and challenges for the childcare industry and workforce.

1. Challenges Accessing Childcare: Over 43.0% of survey respondents who mentioned children in the home described the challenges they had accessing childcare. Many women found themselves scrambling to provide care for their own children while they were also trying to work. One working mother stated, “Our daycare closed in mid-March, and as of today has not reopened. I pivoted to working at night and on weekends while my husband could watch our child who went from zero screen time pre-pandemic to 1 to 2 hours per day so I could work. I let one of my clients go in May 2020 to relieve some stress, and then let my largest client go at the end of July 2020 because I was drowning and could no longer balance the needs of my toddler, work, and mental health. I have no family close by and my husband can be gone a lot for his job. I feel like I had no choice.” Other mothers who had been dependent on family for childcare could no longer rely on that avenue because of the risk of exposure to high-risk individuals.

*“I’ve lost productivity due to stress and non-work-related concerns during the pandemic, such as securing reliable and safe childcare.”*

Despite the increased safety protocols, others did not feel safe sending their children to childcare with possible COVID-19 exposure. As one woman explained, “Child-

care for my two children has been so hard. I am considered high-risk, my husband works 50% of the time in office, and I work from home. I am uncomfortable sending them to a daycare outside of my home. Trying to find someone I can trust to come to my home (and luckily being mostly able to afford to pay them) has been really hard and people have quit on me.” Another respondent stated, “Although childcare and schools are now open, I am not comfortable sending my youngest because of COVID concerns. This has impacted my ability to work.”

Speaking more generally, one mother noted, “I’ve lost productivity due to stress and non-work-related concerns during the pandemic, such as securing reliable and safe childcare.” Another study participant explained, “I am working less because I do not have access to safe childcare and so have missed opportunities.” While another stated, “I hit a burnout wall in June and with the uncertainty of schools being able to return to and stay in-person in the fall, finding affordable quality childcare for my kids, and enough stimulation for my teens through the summer—I decided to let my job go by the end of June.” Overall, these circumstances created incredible stress for working mothers, where, in some cases, cutting back on work hours or even leaving the workforce was the only option they perceived to be available.

2. Challenges for Childcare Industry and Workforce: Respondents to this survey included childcare industry employees and providers (N=70). The childcare workforce and industry in general experienced incredible uncertainty and upheaval. Providers described plummeting enrollment, increased safety protocols and costs, and a progressively unstable workforce.

In terms of employees, many expressed a sense of grief that they were not recognized with essential employee status when they were expected to care for the children of other essential employees who also worked with the public. They mention disappointment that they were not given vaccine priority as well. One respondent proclaimed, “The childcare field is being seriously overlooked, especially since we provide such a crucial service in ordinary times and particularly in crises. Childcare workers being denied early access to the vaccine is a serious concern, since their work is probably helping to keep many other people employed. A single case of COVID-19 could shut down an entire center, affecting dozens of families for several weeks at a time and without warning.” Another stated, “I’m in the childcare business. We are not considered teachers, barely essential workers, and feel left out of a lot of decisions locally and federally.” A third exclaimed, “We are a frontline job, but as a whole do not get the recognition as being professionals; we are ‘just babysitting’ and people don’t realize how much it entails.”

Childcare workers also described shifting industry trends during the pandemic and their effects on the ability for staff to retain necessary hours. One provider stated, “I work in a daycare, and for a while we didn’t have a lot of kids coming because their parents were laid off or they feared that their child would get exposed. We also had to have rules put in place where our numbers were lower than what we normally had, so most of the time workers were either sent home early or we didn’t have to come in that day.” Another participant stated, “The hardest part of this has been the uncertainty of the situation. We were unsure from one day to the next if we would be working, quarantined, or shut down entirely because of the pandemic.” Another worker explained, “I am stressed about getting sick since I work closely with the public. I feel my mental health, physical health, and motivation has greatly decreased.” And, finally, one woman said, “COVID-19 has pretty much destroyed my career in childcare.”

Providers also described the impact the pandemic has had on their childcare businesses and work experiences. One respondent stated, “Beginning in March 2020, I lost 10 out of 16 daycare kids. I have not been able to replace the lost revenue or open childcare spots. I am still paying a full-time employee using grants, but my own income has decreased by over 65%.” Another said, “I am self-employed as a childcare owner and caregiver. I lost clients and income due to COVID. The worry over child illness has increased. I work longer hours due to cleaning, sanitizing, keeping parents informed, and complying with state regulations.” Another provider explained, “It has been extremely difficult to find and maintain employees. Other uncertainties came when parents of the children attending the daycare were laid off or worked from home. A loss in students attending the childcare and income loss made for a very unsure future.” And, finally, one provider lamented, “Telling parents we could no longer care for their children because of licensing rules meant lost income and put families in a hard spot.”

## Caregiving Responsibilities Beyond Children

More than 19% of respondents who mentioned care work discussed other types of caregiving responsibilities beyond their own children. Many faced the stressful reality of caring for older, at-risk adults such as their own parents, while older respondents described caring for their grandchildren. For these respondents, having flexibility and an understanding workplace were as important as they were for mothers. In some cases, respondents were both mothers and caretakers of their parents, which meant much more strict rules about outside activities, which severely limited options for mothers with children of all ages.

**Grandmothers:** Some grandmothers became homeschool teachers for their grandchildren to help their children better balance their work lives. One woman stated, “I have nine

grandchildren and have had to coordinate my schedule with their parents to make sure their [the children’s] needs are met. I have been tutoring grandchildren who are in online school.” Another said, “When our six grandkids’ schools went online, we decided to make our home the education center for all of them. This required a major restructuring of each day! Two of my daughters and I set up class schedules

and rotated everyone to accommodate screen time, reading, tutoring, and more.”

*“More resources for adult caregivers is a huge unmet need before, during, and after the pandemic.”*

Other respondents were the sole caretakers of their grandchildren. One woman explained, “Daycare shut down, so I had to find family or take the time

off to take care of my grandchild who I am responsible for.” Another said, “Lack of after school and daycare during the pandemic is crushing to working parents. Home-schooling for elementary aged kids is a full-time job. I am raising 6- and 7-year-old grandkids, which is 100% consuming of work and job search hours.” Another stated, “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 cannot afford outside care.”

**Caring for Older Adults:** Caregiving to older adults can be all encompassing. One respondent explained, “There is not enough support or resources for those who are caregivers for an elderly parent(s). I work full-time while also caring for my mother who lives with mild Alzheimer’s, congestive heart failure, severe osteoarthritis with pain, epilepsy, and irritable bowel disease. I manage her medications, doctor appointments, meals, laundry, cleaning, pet care, and other daily needs by myself, while also trying to work full-time from home. More resources for adult caregivers is a huge unmet need before, during, and after the pandemic.”

**Multiple Care Work Responsibilities:** Many respondents were both mothers with children at home and caretakers of their parents. They had to navigate caring for an individual in a high-risk category, attend to children with at-home school needs, and attempt to work for their employer. One respondent explained, “All of my breaks from work go to taking care of an elderly parent, three kids, and a house. There’s no real downtime during the day, and I am drowning.” Another stated, “As a mother of adult children that have been impacted by COVID (homeschooling, loss of income in their businesses) and as the daughter of aging parents—it has been exhausting.”

Some respondents have had to be particularly careful during the pandemic. As one stated, “Since Christmas break, I have used FMLA to take two days a week off without pay. I did this so that I can care for my aging parents and the children of my sibling. My parents had been babysitting, but the case rate is so insane that I do not want my parents watching the

kids in case my kids brought in COVID.” Another explained, “I have older parents who rely on me and my family for support. Knowing that I was exposed every day made it very difficult to assist them as needed.” One respondent stated, “I work with the public full-time and am a full-time caregiver for an at-risk parent when at home. You always get ‘all kinds’ in a public setting, but those have been more pronounced and dangerous during the pandemic. The number who have fought mask requirements, which I need them to do for my parent’s sake, has been staggering and terrifying.” A final participant explained, “Caring for my 92-year-old mother and worrying about her health, at the expense of not seeing any of my children and grandchildren, has been overwhelming!”

## Recommendations and Conclusions

This research brief sheds light on the effects of COVID-19 on working women who have caretaking responsibilities. Due to the pandemic, Utah women in the labor force have dealt with many challenges that have impacted their experiences with paid work, and those struggles were magnified for mothers with children in the home and for single mothers in the labor force.

Overall, working mothers found it incredibly stressful to manage the demands of family at home while also working. To meet the needs of both, respondents frequently mentioned working longer hours and days that did not seem to end. These increased responsibilities had a toll on their mental health, often in the form of guilt felt for not being an adequate mother or employee. Mothers described the effects of having a supportive or unsupportive workplace and spouse, the latter leading to additional stress and unneeded uncertainty in a precarious time. Of course, these challenges were exacerbated for single mothers who met all these difficulties often without additional support. This brief also addressed the effects of childcare shortages, the struggling childcare industry, and women’s caregiving responsibilities in addition to their own children.

Based on the findings of this research, there are important actions that can help with a more equitable recovery for Utah women in the workforce. First, if both parents are in the labor force, efforts can be made to equitably distribute unpaid care and housework labor among couples. This will help normalize care work and unpaid labor for both parents and lead to family-friendly policy requests from all employees. Second, employers can provide support and reasonable accommodations for their working parents, such as maintaining the flexible schedules and remote work options successfully utilized during the pandemic. This will encourage women to return to the workforce and provide not only positive social good, but a positive impact on business outcomes. Research has shown that empathetic and supportive policies both attract and retain employees; further, such policies increase employees’ psychological safety, organizational commitment, and productivity. Finally, Utah state and local governments can implement policies that support Utah’s mothers and future mothers in terms of childcare, flexible work

arrangements, family leave policies, and career relaunching programs. The unpaid labor of Utah women benefits the state in compounding ways but prevents women and families from reaching their economic potential. The policy options listed above would ensure that parents can attain the future they choose for themselves and their families.

As Utah leaders and residents do more to understand the challenges that Utah caregivers faced related to COVID-19, a more equitable recovery can be crafted. This will, in turn, strengthen our businesses, families, communities, and the state as a whole.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. (2021, March). *COVID-19 impacts by gender*. <https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/C19Impacts-FS-Mar2021.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> McKinsey & Company, & Lean In. (2020). *Women in the workplace 2020*. [https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women\\_in\\_the\\_Workplace\\_2020.pdf](https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> 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>

*Acknowledgements:* This brief was made possible through the generous support of the Beesley Family Foundation, Rich and LeAnn Crandall, and Utah State University Extension. We would also like to thank those who were involved in the extensive coding analysis for this project: Erin Jemison, Dianne McAdams-Jones, Nkoyo Iyamba, Allie Barnes, Kaitlyn Pieper, and Shannyn Walters.

Copyright © 2021 Utah Women & Leadership Project