

Eleven Major Challenges Utah Women Face

Setting the Stage

National and statewide studies continue to show that women and girls in Utah are not thriving in critical areas. Year after year, Utah continues to have high levels of domestic violence, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and gender-based discrimination.¹ Utah also is ranked as the worst state for women’s equality and has low levels of women’s leadership representation in nearly all domains, including politics and business. Although the needle has moved slightly in a few areas, the current trajectory will require three to four more decades to make notable progress. With this in mind, the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) has undertaken A Bolder Way Forward (BWF) with the goal of helping more Utah girls and women thrive.²

While there have been many involved in trying make positive change for Utah women and girls, efforts have been made independently, as “parts.” A Bolder Way Forward applies the philosophy that that “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts” to coordinate and unify advances of the common cause as uniformly as possible.

To support the effort, the goal of this research and policy brief is to educate the public on Utahns’ perceptions of the challenges women and girls face. Being able to identify and understand the current challenges facing women is critical for those who want to engage and work together for the common good.

Study Background & Overview

During the fall of 2023, UWLP researchers conducted a statewide study to establish a baseline of public perceptions related to the awareness, understanding, and attitudes around challenges and opportunities that Utah girls and women face. An 80-item online survey was administered to a nonprobability sample of Utah women and men. The survey questions were based on existing literature and survey instruments as well as input from experts and baseline data BWF leaders needed in the 18 areas of focus. In addition, there were 13 demographic questions; finally, two open-ended questions invited narrative responses regarding the greatest challenges and opportunities facing women and girls in the state.

Overall, 3,505 participants completed the survey, and 2,433 participants offered their thoughts on the greatest challenges Utah women and girls face. Those who responded to the survey are not considered representative of the state in several respects. For example, when compared to overall state demographics, this study under-sampled people of color, individuals with less formal education, and residents in lower

income ranges. A more detailed analysis of participant demographics is available on A Bolder Way Forward’s [website](#).

This is the first research and policy brief to share the comprehensive findings from the open-ended questions of this study; its purpose is to share at a high level the challenges that the participants identified.

Findings – Perceived Challenges

At the end of the survey, participants answered an open-ended question to share their perceptions of the greatest challenges facing Utah women and girls. Table 1 shows a summary of the 11 specific categories cited most frequently, with a final catch-all for miscellaneous concerns. The table includes a count of the total number of mentions for each of the categories and the percentage representation of the total number of comments (N=2,433). It should be noted that many comments were included in several categories, as individual statements were often related to a variety of themes. As a result, there is some overlap among categories.

Table 1: Perceived Challenges

Categories	#	%
1. Lack of recognition/undervalued (includes sexism, bias, and discrimination)	1,022	42.0
2. Gendered expectations (includes economic insecurity)	1,015	41.7
3. Religious influence	665	27.3
4. Balancing career and home (includes caregiving and domestic labor)	618	25.4
5. Work-related inequities (includes inequities in opportunities and pay)	567	23.3
6. Difficulty with self-worth/self-confidence	428	17.6
7. Lack of support or opportunities	380	15.6
8. Lack of education or training	357	14.7
9. Experiencing abuse, assault, and/or harassment	355	14.6
10. Medical and health resource concerns (includes reproductive rights and mental health)	322	13.2
11. Lack of women in leadership	258	11.0
Miscellaneous concerns	535	22.0

Category 1: Lack of Recognition/Undervalued

The most common category cited as a challenge for Utah women and girls was being undervalued or experiencing a lack of recognition for their skills, talents, and expertise. Of the total 2,433 comments offered by participants regarding the challenges of Utah women, 42.0% (N=1,022) related to this category. This included comments that shared the

perception that Utah girls and women were commonly not viewed as equals with men, were seen in a lower status, and frequently experienced a lack of respect or outright disrespect. Participants felt Utah women and girls were not heard or believed, that there were men in Utah who were threatened by strong women, and that they were suppressed from freely expressing themselves. For example,

“Women and girls from a very early age are taught in this state that their very existence is substandard to men.”

“I have had a lot of personal experiences that men felt threatened when I stood up for my boundaries.”

“There is a perception that women are ‘less than’ or not as smart as men.”

“The culture really points to women being second to men and as less important and less educated.”

“The greatest challenge women and girls face is that they have lower status than the men.”

“In my experience as a male, I have heard from my female friends who are living in Utah that they feel both socially and systematically that their professional and academic contributions to society are undervalued.”

Other comments highlighted ways girls and women in Utah were often the target of sexism, bias, and discrimination:

“The greatest challenge for women and girls is overcoming sexism in all areas of life (e.g., religious, social, career, politics, etc.).”

“The greatest challenges for women and girls in Utah are the underlying beliefs that reinforce gender stereotypes, including sexism and misogyny. Until we are seen as equal partners in the home, at work, and on the steps of the legislature, change will be slow and arduous.”

“Another great challenge is sexism and objectification of women’s bodies. The idea that women’s bodies are objects for power and pleasure in Utah’s patriarchal society is a challenge.”

“Gender bias is so strong here that it is really tough for women to advance their careers beyond mid-level management. Unconscious bias, in particular, drives a lot of challenges for professional women.”

Category 2: Gendered Expectations

Closely following responses that highlighted how women and girls in Utah are undervalued, the second most common challenge, at 41.7% (N=1,015), was gendered expectations. These comments included personal, cultural, or social expectations that women should act and behave in a way that aligns with traditional female roles, where women stay at home and raise children. Participants commented on the social pressure put on women out of a sense of duty to their family or religion to do what men say and to succumb to male domination. Some participants referenced the “purity culture” within the state,

which places an unequal, strict expectation of modesty and chastity on women and not on men. Some examples included the following:

“Utah is a very male-dominated society where most women/girls were raised to get married young and start having babies, with the intent that the mother will stay home to raise them while the husband works. Therefore, many set aside their own aspirations and dreams to take this role. Women who do not assume this role in Utah are looked down upon by others who have accepted the role.”

“Patriarchal structure is *the* foundation of everything here. Women and girls are not valued as equals.”

“Purity culture is harmful to our women and children, adding shame to their internal monologue, which leads to less reporting of abuse.”

“The long-standing attitude about women’s best place being the home, in a traditional setting of stay-at-home moms. Also, the age range at which women feel that they need to be married or have children is a big stress instead of finding out who they are as an individual first.”

Included in the gendered expectations category were comments that acknowledged the economic impact and financial dependence that gendered expectations reinforce. Participants noted that for some women, staying at home limited their earning potential and resulted in their living in poverty. Others felt the lack of financial independence contributed to women feeling they could not leave an unhealthy relationship. Some also noted the financial impact on women’s senior years. For example,

“I believe the greatest challenges for women and girls in Utah is lack of preparedness to be self-sustaining. Women often marry and sacrifice education to be a mother, which is noble, but leaves them unprepared in the event of financial hardship through illness, death, or divorce.”

“I’ve also watched many of my friends and neighbors suffer because they weren’t prepared to take care of themselves when a spouse passes away, or a divorce happens, or other tragic events. I’ve also known many women who are exhausted and spend much of their lives feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled.”

“Women who devote their lives to family and community vs career have no retirement, insurance, or monetary benefits, leaving them dependent on a career-oriented husband and having no independent security.”

Category 3: Religious Influence

At 27.3% (N=665), the third most common challenge for Utah girls and women related to the influence of religion, church, and/or faith. Many comments in this category linked gender role expectations with religious beliefs or practices. Comments in this area included the following:

“For girls, the predominate male-driven religion and culture in our state tells us we aren’t as important. We are taught to be pretty and get a rich husband. There is no emphasis on self-reliance and/or professional success.”

“Women and girls in Utah are told from a very young age that a lot of their worth/value is based on becoming a wife/mother/homemaker. The Mormon church pushes this agenda on females. Women are more than just their reproductive systems.”

“I strongly think that because of the predominant religion and the teachings that it publicly pushes out to the masses, there is a strong bias against women being successful in the workforce.”

“The predominant religion and culture values women in a subservient support role. This permeates all areas of culture in this state regardless of your religion.”

Category 4: Balancing Career and Home

Of all the comments shared by participants on the perceived challenges faced by women and girls in Utah, 25.4% (N=618) focused on balancing career and home. This included the challenge of being a working mother and feeling an expectation to be “Superwoman,” while others pointed to the stigma of being a working mother. For example,

“Balancing the strong cultural expectations of childbearing, childrearing, and being a homemaker, while still achieving professionally.”

“Being both a successful wife and mother, while also being a successful career woman is an incredibly difficult balance that requires help and support of family and friends. Many people do not have access to those support systems.”

“My mother’s generation was told ‘you can have it all.’ My generation is reckoning with the idea that ‘having it all’ also means ‘doing it all’ while fighting persistent stereotypes and prejudices both in and outside of the workplace.”

“[Women] are also socialized to take on much more of the mental load compared to their male counterparts, especially in regards to parenting and running the household.”

“Unrealistic expectations that women are superheroes at home, church, and work.”

Within this category were several comments that related to caregiving or childcare. Specifically, participants frequently voiced the difficulty of accessing quality, affordable childcare. Participants noted that coordinating childcare is frequently seen as the responsibility of women, which places an added burden on them. Some participants noted challenges caused by the schools, including start and end times, extended breaks, and lack of coordination of breaks between lower grades and higher grades. For example,

“It is difficult to explain to men the mental and emotional workload that women carry and how exhausting it is.”

“I hear over and over, ‘I would go to work, but I would only get paid enough to pay for childcare.’ This stifles women into thinking their best option is to never work.”

“The culture of Utah puts women in a lower category. They set them up to fail by having expectations that essentially punish them for working outside the home. Men have forgotten that it’s also their responsibility to raise kids and not just for discipline.”

“Childcare costs are so high that often times it doesn’t make financial sense for both husband and wife to work.”

“The hours for schools, and the lack of alignment between the grade spans basically relies on a stay-at-home adult to manage and supervise it all. For example, the district where my children attend has their elementary schools on an early release schedule for Fridays, while my middle schooler has a late start, and the time frames for fall break and spring break do not align.”

Also within this category were comments related to domestic labor. Many participants noted that when a majority of the caregiving and domestic responsibilities fell to women, it became an additional challenge that could be overwhelming to navigate. A few offered how they were fortunate to have a partner who shared in the domestic work and responsibilities, citing that they considered their situation an exception. Comments in the domestic labor area included the following:

“You can work ‘outside the home,’ but your responsibilities at home remain the same. This leads to burnout and fuels the gender gap in terms of women feeling they must be the ones to take a break in their career to provide caregiving.”

“There is a presumption of responsibility for childcare and domestic labor that is inequitable.”

“We *must* see fathers sharing in childcare and household chores like cooking and laundry. How do we teach our sons to be better, so that the next generation has these things feel like a ‘norm’ not like extra gold stars only for dads?”

Category 5: Work-Related Inequities

At 23.3% (N=567), inequities related to the work setting were the next most common challenge for women and girls in Utah. Participants noted that women have fewer opportunities for employment and fewer advancement opportunities. Inconsistent or nonexistent parental leave was specifically named, as was an overall lack of workplace support and resources for parents, particularly the lack of skill development opportunities for women returning to work.

Participants underscored the difficulty women face in accessing higher paid positions typically held by men and the lack of job opportunities in male-dominated fields. Few employers were open to flexible hours, and many respondents felt that women were “underemployed,” meaning their skills and talents were not being used. Finally, participants voiced frustration with the lack of part-time professional positions within Utah. For example,

“Some assume a woman would not like a promotion with a heavier workload because she has young kids. Men who have kind hearts and want to support women often don’t give them the opportunity to succeed because of unnoticed internal biases.”

“Another serious challenge is that so many businesses/organizations support women’s equality in name only.”

“There is a promotion gap—men being given promotions, challenges, and greater responsibilities sooner, while over-qualified women wait and are underemployed.”

“I feel that men largely view women’s role outside of the home as something temporary or fleeting, as if they are ‘bidding time’ until they choose to stay at home and, therefore, do not consider them seriously for advancement or development opportunities.”

“It is a challenge for women to see/know about opportunities for education and employment outside of the traditional ‘female’ jobs.”

Included in this category were comments that focused on the issue of income inequality in Utah:

“The greatest challenges for women and girls in Utah include receiving lesser pay in contrast to men.”

“The pay gap is *real*, and it prevents women from reaching their potential in life.”

“I was point-blank told that the man I was working with needed to make more money because he was the head of a single-income family who had 6 dependents to provide for.”

“I held the same positions as my male peers but was always paid lower or treated differently because I was a woman.”

“This makes it challenging to get equal pay and opportunity when men think we don’t belong.”

Category 6: Difficulty with Self-Worth and Self-Confidence

The next most frequently identified challenge, at 17.6% (N=428), related to a lack of self-worth or self-confidence. Participants expressed concern for the deep internal struggles women and girls experienced in Utah, particularly as they related to the expectation of being and looking “perfect.” Many commented on the unhealthy influence of peers and social media that obsessed on one’s looks. Examples included the following:

“Low self-esteem is predominant in Utah women. They are not educated to realize that they’re just as important as the men and that their opinion matters.”

“Self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and lack of desire. I think there are lots of opportunities for women in Utah, but women have to believe in themselves to pursue them.”

“Perfectionist culture—we’ve got to get rid of the word ‘perfect’ from a cultural standpoint.”

“I worry about the impact that social media influencers have on young women’s perceptions of success, beauty, motherhood, and being mentally healthy life partners. Everyone wants to have the Instagram life. Botox is being marketed to people in their 20s. What happened to aging gracefully?”

“I think one of the greatest challenges for women and girls in Utah is being socialized to be people pleasers rather than advocating for their own feelings and desires. They are taught to always put other people first.”

“Self-image and belonging. I believe social media has done a huge injustice to our young girls who are always comparing if they measure up. Adult women can suffer from the same problem. Eating disorders and self-loathing are among the problems that rank high in Utah.”

Category 7: Lack of Support or Opportunities

A lack of support or opportunities came in next, at 15.6% (N=380). Comments in this category communicated an overall lack of awareness of available resources, support, or opportunities. Some pointed to women and girls experiencing a lack of support or of lower expectations from family members, while others noted the lack of access to mentors. Some expressed concern with the lack of support or resources for single mothers, while others felt a lack of support for women who chose to stay home and be caregivers:

“We pressure women so much here to have kids and families but then offer them no support (mental health, physical wellness, marriage counseling, childcare, etc.). For a state that emphasizes families so much it’s shocking how little support they give families.”

“Feeling supported in their goals and aspirations is a challenge. I think women and girls are looking for mentors and leaders they can look up to, to give them hope that they can be equally successful.”

“Women and girls from minority groups (Hispanic/Latino, Pacific Islander, Black, Native American, etc.) have even more hurdles to jump through to advance academically and financially.”

“Lack of familial support in certain career choices. I felt limited in my career choices because my family encouraged me only to pursue careers that would allow me to spend more time at home with my children.”

“I think a lot of women don’t know where to turn for help and worry about being judged.”

Category 8: Lack of Education or Training

At 14.7% (N=357), the next category related to the lack of education or training. Many participants expressed concern that the education of women is not considered a priority in Utah. Others added concerns that girls and women in Utah were not encouraged to pursue education outside of gendered or cultural norms, that there was an overall lack of access to affordable education, and there was a lack of help for those trying to navigate financial aid. For example,

“Gender role limitations: girls don’t need to go to college, girls [are] not encouraged to join STEM (not necessarily discouraged, just not proactively recruited). Having it taken for

granted that they will automatically follow traditional gender roles.”

“Lingering cultural assumptions that women and girls should not pursue a maximum amount of education and that they should primarily consider future parenting in those decisions. Girls and women cut short their educational pursuits, or set them aside, in favor of men.”

“Lack of access to educational opportunities including funding and scholarships is a challenge. Also, there [are] educational biases (i.e., steered towards particular classes).”

“In Utah we have a culture of women feeling like their only option in life is to just get married and have children—no other career or personal ambitions. That is how I grew up, and I felt that there was not a path for me to go to college or an expectation for me to do well in school.”

“Not getting an education often keeps women ‘trapped’ in bad marriages due to financial constraints, especially when children are involved.”

Category 9: Experiencing Abuse, Assault, and/or Harassment

While 14.6% (N=355) of the comments addressed abuse, many participants expressed profound concern for the challenges women and girls in Utah face due to abuse, assault, and harassment, with many women sharing their own personal experiences in this area.

An overall lack of safety due to gender was an issue, with participants citing the all-too-common experiences of Utah girls and women related to sexual assault, domestic violence, harassment, and emotional abuse. Participants expressed concern for the way women are sexualized and noted a lack of education and awareness of these issues in the state. Examples included the following:

“For my age at least, because of my own experiences and other girls I know, we are constantly being sexually harassed, whether it’s verbal or physical. The frustrating part is it’s become normalized, and no one cares to do anything, or doesn’t know what they can do.”

“Boundaries are challenging. Girls and women especially are taught to ‘be nice’ even when being nice typically leads to higher occurrences of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, molestation, and other negative experiences. All coming back to having a hard time feeling they can’t say no.”

“I am only 24, but I believe one of the greatest challenges young girls in Utah face is escaping sexual harassment and assault. Nearly all my friends and myself have been harassed or assaulted by boys while in high school and college. I feel that boys do not care about consent and are very sexually selfish.”

“Sexual abuse is an under-reported issue in our state. I also think we are out of touch with sexual harassment of women and how common it is. Women aren’t taken seriously when talking [about] or reporting violence.”

“Sexual assault and abuse are one of the highest in the country. We don’t talk about the taboo topics, but it’s still happening, and not talking about it simply makes it worse.”

Category 10: Medical & Health Resource Concerns

Concerns related to medical and health resources were the next category, at 13.2% (N=322). Participants expressed concern at the inability of girls and women to make decisions related to their own reproductive health care. Some felt that the lack of sex education, particularly around consent, posed a significant challenge. For example,

“Lack of bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom—these are some of the greatest challenges for Utah women and girls.”

“I also think the greatest challenge for women and girls in Utah is the education about our own bodies, reproductive rights, and not enough education about sex. I think this influences a lot of challenges that women and girls in Utah face, like sexual harassment, domestic violence, etc.”

“Understanding they are in charge of their own bodies, including decisions related to healthcare, sexual activity, and image. Both girls/women and boys/men need clear education about boundaries and consent.”

“I think there are a lot of challenges related to sexual health. I think often it is not talked about or women and girls have misconceptions about it, which impacts their relationships with others and their own confidence and understanding of their bodies.”

In this category there were also comments about the lack of education on overall health-related issues, and mental health issues in particular, which included support in dealing with depression and anxiety. For example,

“In medical offices, women and girls tend to be dismissed most when it comes to complaints of chronic pain, unknown pains, other concerns are typically dismissed as something to do with hormones, weight, or emotions.”

“I’m worried about the mental health of women and girls. Teens and young adults, in particular. I think depression, anxiety, trauma, and comparing are big concerns.”

“Healthcare and the understanding of women’s health differences are acute problems, especially for women of color. For example, heart distinctions are often overlooked in women. It’s just anxiety.”

“Mental health: Depression and anxiety are serious problems and can’t be fixed for good with just a pill. They can be helped but are often overlooked or dismissed as not as serious as physical disabilities. Doctors and resources are expensive, and [it is] hard to even get an appointment.”

“Personally, my mental health is suffering severely, and I don’t have access to the resources I need. It is interfering with my work situation, in turn influencing my financial and housing resources. I honestly feel hopeless as an adult female in Utah.”

Category 11: Lack of Women in Leadership

At 11.0% (N=268), the lack of Utah women in leadership roles was identified as the next greatest challenge. Participants felt that in general, women leaders were not supported in Utah and felt there was an overall need for more women

leaders and women in positions of power. Many in this category expressed concern with the lack of representation of women in Utah politics and called for more women in elected positions:

“Not enough female voices in the room for decision making. Especially decisions that directly affect women and girls.”

“I think so much of this is also just ingrained in our heads as girls in Utah. I want to run for political office, but my head says I have to be home with my kids. But my friend who is a man (and has young kids) doesn’t even consider this.”

“There are not enough women in positions of power or influence advocating for women and girls. This impacts reproductive rights, safety, and the perception of women’s value.”

“One of the biggest challenges I’ve run into is not looking like the predominant, ingrained idea of what ‘authority’ looks like.”

“Nothing about us without us. We need more women in leadership roles, making laws and policies, in business, etc. Policies and practices are made from a male perspective, which makes the disparity for women even greater.”

Category 12: Miscellaneous Concerns

A final category of Miscellaneous concerns functioned as a catch-all for significant comments that were not mentioned frequently enough to warrant a stand-alone category. This involved 22.0% (N=535) of the comments. Some in this category referenced concerns with current politics, while a handful of others highlighted challenges related to housing or the state of the economy in general. A small number cited the lack of support from other women, and others specifically acknowledged the additional challenges faced by women of color as well as women who identify as LGBTQ+. Finally, there was a handful of participants who felt there are no challenges for women in Utah. Examples included the following:

“Housing affordability may force women into the workforce in higher percentages than ever before, and I’m not sure workplace readiness is keeping up with the percentage needing to work full time, so many will be trying to contribute to household income with limited skills/education.”

“I’m just so tired of living in Utah. Every day it gets a little worse for women.”

“Other women and girls who are not supportive of women and girls who seem to be pursuing degrees or jobs that are not ‘women’s’ jobs. Women sometimes say that a woman has taken a good job that should have gone to her son.”

“I’m honestly not sure. I think women have just as much potential and opportunity as men do. I don’t really know what struggles women are facing in Utah right now.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

This brief focuses on recent research that was conducted in support of the statewide initiative, “A Bolder Way Forward” (BWF), in an effort to establish a baseline for public perceptions related to awareness, attitudes, and concerns about challenges facing Utah women and girls. This document provides a summary of the greatest challenges identified by survey participants, who were of all genders. Subsequent briefs will focus on the perceived opportunities for Utah women and girls as well as more in-depth explorations of the various topics raised by research participants. For solutions, learn more about a [BWF](#) and the bold goals for the 18 areas of focus.

In summary, the brief has two purposes: first, we hope to educate readers on the many challenges that girls and women experience in Utah; second, we hope to harness collective efforts and resources to mitigate the challenges. The overarching goal of A Bolder Way Forward is to help more Utah girls, women, and families thrive. When we strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women, we strengthen everyone!

Acknowledgements: This brief was made possible through the generous support of the Peterson Family Foundation. We would also like to thank all BWF leaders and partners across the state who helped distribute this survey.

Copyright © 2024 Utah Women & Leadership Project

¹ Anderson, K., & Madsen, S. R. (2024, January 4). *The current status of Utah women and girls: A research synopsis*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/wp/no-9.pdf>

² Utah Women & Leadership Project. (n.d.). *A Bolder Way Forward*. www.abolderwayforward.org