

## Seven Top Opportunities for Utah Girls and Women

### Setting the Stage

Although national and statewide studies continue to show that women and girls in Utah are not thriving in critical areas, the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) also wanted to explore what Utahns believe are opportunities for females in the state. With Utah continuing to have high levels of domestic violence, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and gender-based discrimination<sup>1</sup> and ranking as the worst state for women’s equality with low levels of women’s leadership representation in nearly all domains, Utahns need reminders that there are opportunities available. Even though we do know that the needle has moved slightly in a few areas—including educational attainment, civic engagement, and some leadership domains—at the current rates, it will take three to four decades to make notable progress. This is not good enough for many Utah women, men, and families.

A new statewide initiative, A Bolder Way Forward (BWF), is focused on helping more Utah girls and women thrive. It seeks to bring together those efforts in a coordinated approach in order to advance a common cause more uniformly. To support the effort, the goal of this research and policy brief is to identify and share the perceived opportunities available to girls and women in Utah. Being able to identify and leverage these opportunities by those who want to engage and work together for the common good can help counter the challenges currently faced by Utah girls and women.

### 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 2,196 of the participants offered their thoughts on the greatest challenges Utah women and girls faced. 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 the participant demographics is available on A Bolder Way Forward’s [website](#).

This research and policy brief is intended to share the comprehensive findings from the open-ended questions of this study by sharing at a high level the perceived opportunities available to Utah girls and women.

### Findings – Perceived Opportunities

At the end of the survey, participants answered an open-ended question about their perceptions of the greatest opportunities available to Utah women and girls. Table 1 shows a summary of seven specific categories that emerged most frequently, with a final catch-all for miscellaneous responses. 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=2,196). 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 Opportunities for Utah Women & Girls**

Categories	#	%
1. Work and employment opportunities	829	37.8
2. Education and training	739	33.7
3. Embrace potential (includes being an entrepreneur)	617	28.1
4. Support personal choices (includes support network and male allies)	472	21.5
5. Connect/work together for change	373	17.0
6. More women in leadership and public office	369	16.8
7. Increase awareness of community resources/support	366	16.7
Miscellaneous (includes “don’t know”)	519	23.6

### Category 1: Work and Employment Opportunities

The most common category cited as an opportunity for Utah women and girls related to work and employment opportunities. Of the total of 2,196 comments offered by participants, 37.8% (N=829) related to this category. Respondents called for more employers in Utah to adopt family-friendly workplace policies to better support parents—specifically, offering parental leave, schedule flexibility, and on-site childcare. Participants also felt that Utah employers could do more to provide women with equal access to work and advancement opportunities, including higher paying jobs. Equivalent compensation for men and women for equal work was a related concern. Some also identified the need for workplaces to be

more proactive in supporting women returning to the workforce. For example, participants shared,

“Supportive Policies: Implementing policies that promote gender equality, such as pay equity measures and work-life balance initiatives, can create a more supportive environment for women in Utah.”

“Workplaces are rare but needed that offer not only good family benefits but allow things like job sharing, promotion of women in part-time positions, and help for those returning to the workforce.”

“Mid-sized companies do not have the scale to have training programs that can accelerate women’s development. This is where a public-private partnership could fill the void.”

“If the state wants more women in the workforce, they *must* invest in better childcare. It’s not just a women’s problem—it’s a family problem.”

“Childcare is also an important field that is very necessary for working families. I believe it would be great if Utah would provide more resources (including funding and guidance) to the childcare industry. The cost of childcare needs to be balanced with wages available for both childcare workers and the families that depend on childcare.”

“We are primed to bring in women to industries that currently have low female involvement if we have mentorship programs to support them in those industries.”

“Help organizations create more jobs that allow mothers to work part-time and keep their ‘hand-in-the-game’ while still balancing family needs in the years that are most challenging and time-consuming for mothers. This will allow them to more easily re-enter the full-time workforce if/when desired.”

“More companies offering paid maternity leave (and paternity leave) is an opportunity for Utah.”

“Employers that understand a work-life balance and value both are important! As a mother with a phenomenal team of understanding co-workers, I appreciate the difference it creates. I am very dedicated to both my job and my family. I have opportunities to grow in my career without being penalized for having a life outside of work.”

Many comments identified specific fields that create opportunities for girls and women, particularly jobs in the trades or STEM fields:

“The greatest opportunity for women and girls in Utah is the diversifying landscape of the community.”

“With Utah’s tech presence, I believe there are great opportunities in STEM and business for women who would like to pursue that path in life. There are opportunities in business, computer science, graphic design, any of those fields.”

“Many trades are really seeking out women and girls, when they did not before.”

“A tech business community that is actively addressing inequality and gender bias is a positive.”

“Trade work is a great opportunity for girls and women if they can find the confidence and support in these fields.”

“Respect for those who choose pathways that aren’t as prevalent to women, such as construction management, utility work, and other trades.”

“Why aren’t there more women in male-dominated roles such as welding, building, electricians, plumbing, etc.? While the cost of college keeps going up and up, the trades are where women can make money while they learn, and when they graduate, they don’t have a giant debt to pay back. But you don’t see a lot of women in these trades, so why would a young woman choose to go down that path?”

## Category 2: Education and Training

The second most frequently identified opportunity for Utah girls and women, at 33.7% (N=739), related to education and training. Most of the comments within this category supported girls and women pursuing formal education and training and called for help accessing financial assistance or low-cost/free tuition. Some examples include the following:

“Higher education—it has never been more accessible, and women are outpacing men in enrollment nationally. We have to encourage girls to go to school and stay there until they have the degree they need for the job they want.”

“I think our high schools are set up to offer great ways to complete college credit while in high school. This should make our college graduation rate much higher than it is, especially for women.”

“Another opportunity is the many affordable (in comparison) secondary education opportunities within miles of their homes.”

“For adult women, there are many good universities in Utah. At my own university, there are grants and scholarships specifically for women. For example, there is one scholarship that is for women attending school while raising children.”

“Online learning gives women 24/7 access to resources to learn about and develop positive attributes that can benefit them in their personal and professional lives.”

“I do think Utah needs more alternative forms of post-high school training programs where they can work and be trained directly with employers in a field that they want to go into.”

“I think there is strong support for education and a push to be able to focus on whichever field of interest appeals to a girl. We have a strong secondary education system with something available for every woman/girl—from trade school to post-graduate education. The variety of options makes for a great opportunity for women and girls.”

## Category 3: Embrace Potential

At 28.1% (N=617), the third most frequently mentioned opportunity was encouraging Utah girls and women to embrace their potential by believing in themselves, acknowledging their abilities, and taking control of their own destiny. Some

participants encouraged women and girls to use their voice and speak up for what they want. Others called for girls and women to become financially literate, specifically with their personal finances, so they could become self-sufficient and independent. Participants also encouraged girls and women to pursue enriching life experiences and develop life skills. Comments in this area included the following:

“As I watch my unbelievably strong three-year-old daughter, I know that she is inherently capable of doing anything. That grit and desire I see in her represents the greatest opportunity for women and girls. We simply need to tap into that moxie that exists in us and refuse to accept the status quo.”

“Don’t let others tell them what they should be, rather they choose for themselves and achieve that goal.”

“I think the great opportunities for women and girls are the ones they create for themselves because this state doesn’t really offer them much otherwise.”

“I think women and girls can do anything if they choose to. But I think it takes confidence and support to do it. They need to believe they can.”

“Women who are financially independent are more equal in relationships, less likely to fall victim to abuse, and will raise strong and independent children who are less likely to fall victim to child abuse.”

“I would like to become better educated on financial independence and security as an individual even though I’m married. I was a stay-at-home-mom for 20 years. I’m back in the workforce for the past eight years. Even though my husband and I have our financial plan together, if we divorced, my financial security is somewhat vague for me.”

“Financial education in schools! Financial education = freedom.”

“Education is key toward gaining great opportunities, but that doesn’t necessarily mean only formal education. There are many other kinds of experiences that add educational tones to one’s life.”

A large group of participants felt there was considerable support for women and girls in Utah to become entrepreneurs and start their own businesses:

“One opportunity is launching a small business in Utah. I think there is a very strong market for small, women-owned businesses in Utah, and that policy/support for those small businesses is quite strong.”

“The biggest opportunity is to be educated and start our own businesses.”

“I have always felt the men feel that they have power over the women in workplaces and would often take advantage of their role in the situation. I couldn’t face that anymore and decided to be an entrepreneur and run as a women owner in a male-dominated industry. I wanted to empower other girls and women to not be afraid to take the risk and to fight for what is right. I am running a very successful business now and only being in business for 2 years.”

“Utah women are just as imaginative and inventive as Utah’s men! They just don’t know how to capture and protect their ideas. Utah can do better, and we need to provide women with the support they need to grow and commercialize their inventions/innovations!”

“Starting and successfully running a small business is a big opportunity women have in Utah (I’m doing it!)”

#### **Category 4: Support Personal Choices**

The next most frequently mentioned opportunity available to women and girls in Utah, at 21.5% (N=472), focused on the need for those in their lives to support their choices, whether that decision was to be a mother, to pursue a career, or a combination of the two. Comments included the following:

“Whatever a woman or girl wants to do are great opportunities. If they want to stay home, that’s great! If they want to work, that’s great! I think fewer women act on opportunities that they have though.”

“The pervasive message that women are ‘caregivers’ only and are mothers first and foremost is unhealthy and damaging. While I appreciate the importance of motherhood and respect mothers who decide to be homemakers (several of my close friends and family members have decided to do this), women are more than just a reproductive body and should be allowed to choose education and a career without difficulty, judgment, or prejudice.”

“The assumption that every woman wants the same thing in her future is challenging. It is equally okay to want a career or to be a homemaker or something in between. Women are judged for and criticized no matter where they fall in the scale. We have an opportunity to change that.”

“Help women feel supported in making the choice that is best for them—whether that is a career or a stay-at-home mother. More value shouldn’t be assigned to either one. Help individuals feel important and valued with whatever is best for them.”

When talking about supporting the choices of girls and women, parents were seen as a foundational source of that support, but others were also seen as an equally important part of a support network, including extended family members, teachers, coaches, and mentors:

“I think supportive families create the greatest opportunities for women and girls.”

“Many family units encourage and are supportive of women and girls bettering themselves in the workforce.”

“Most importantly, I had a mother who raised me to believe I was capable of anything and emphasized that I needed to be able to take care of myself financially.”

“Finding allies to support their goals and aspirations.”

“We need organizations in our community that will mentor all ages of women. Not just church mentors.”

“I think because I did well in high school, I had teachers, parents, [and] coaches who expected a lot from me. I felt that they knew I would go to college and do well.”

Some participant comments encouraged women to find a supportive partner who treated them as an equal:

“It takes being with a partner who is willing to support those choices through open and safe discussions where equitable distribution of labor and life can be addressed.”

“I married a man from outside Utah and outside the LDS church. I’m an equal partner in my home, but not in my larger culture (political community, church, work).”

“We need to educate women that it’s okay to pursue their passions! And that it is imperative to find a life partner that will support and inspire your goals, just as much as their own.”

A considerable number of participants identified including boys and men in conversations around equality as a valuable opportunity as well as encouraging men to become allies. For example,

“I don’t think Utah has done a good job recruiting male allies. If we leave out half the population, it’s highly problematic.”

“I agree that men need to help in the advancement and share leadership opportunities and responsibilities.”

“Most men in Utah want to support women but maybe don’t know how to best do that.”

“Women and girls in Utah are poised to, with our male allies, move into current and future positions of leadership—whether politics, STEM, or any other area. Women must be seen and modeled in these roles.”

“We need more men advocating for women’s equality. It seems like there’s real opportunity to change things if women and their male allies work together to say enough is enough.”

### Category 5: Connect and Work Together for Change

Opportunities to connect, network, and work together for change was the next most frequently cited category, coming in at 17.0% (N=373). Numerous participants specifically acknowledged the benefit of girls and women connecting with each other. Some highlighted the power of women coming together to collaborate, which reinforced a sense of community. Others acknowledged there has been some progress towards gender equality but encouraged women and male allies to use their voices to continue moving the work forward. For instance,

“I love the communities of women that exist in our state. We have so many opportunities to access spaces built by and for women where we can come together to make really beautiful things happen.”

“There are support networks for women and girls, but we need more.”

“Relentless incrementalism—I heard that term in a recent training, and it resonated so beautifully. Sustainable change requires gradual progress and growth.”

“Places where women can congregate and commune together outside of male perception or insight.”

“I know that once you get in a supportive group of women, that group will rally and cheer for all your success. The women here are wonderful about caring for each other and helping each other succeed.”

“Slowly shifting social change in favor of women and women’s issues.”

“Women and men who are helping pave the way and demand equitable opportunities for them.”

“When women see other women leading, it inspires others to get involved. It’s not men vs women—it’s men and women working side by side to better our state, our towns, and our neighborhoods.”

### Category 6: Women in Leadership and Public Office

The next most frequently identified opportunity for women and girls in Utah, at 16.8% (N=369), focused on supporting more women to become leaders, including running for and being elected to public office. There was a call for more women to hold positions of power, citing the importance of their being role models for young girls and boys. Examples included the following:

“Women could and should feel empowered to take part just as much as men do. They deserve leadership positions just as much as anybody else.”

“I have a daughter who is a freshman at UVU, and I’m grateful she has the opportunity to see a woman lead the largest university in Utah.”

“There has been a push to support women in politics, I feel, and that is beneficial when women are in places of decision making.”

“There is a goldmine of opportunity in politics and business! We need more women deciding our laws, running our schools (superintendents), and running for school board. We need more women CEOs.”

“I think the greatest opportunities for women and girls in Utah are in leadership roles and the opportunity for more diversity. I know women that I work with face challenges being in leadership positions and having to voice their opinions and what seems like putting in more time and work to prove their worth. But I also see a lot of opportunity for growth for women to lead in workplaces, politics, and in our own communities.”

“We need to encourage women to participate in all levels of government and boards. Running in municipal elections is very difficult as you don’t get party support and essentially have to figure it out on your own. Support for municipal races would be key to opening doors higher up.”

“Mentoring young women to be leaders in the business and political realms is an opportunity.”

“If a woman has entered into a leadership position, more young women are likely to be hired or have opportunity for advancement; so, if a woman is driving the opportunities, then women will have them.”

### **Category 7: Increase Community Resources and Support**

Closely following the call for more women leaders was the opportunity to increase awareness and access to available resources and support, at 16.7% (N=366). Many felt that girls and women in Utah are not aware of the resources that were available in the community, and increasing access to information was seen as creating significant opportunity. A few also offered comments on the benefits of volunteering. For example,

“There are amazing opportunities. I am just not sure girls and women know about them, and if they do, are empowered to access them.”

“There are organizations that specifically serve women and girls; however, most of them aren’t widely known as resources we have access to.”

“Yes, but there can always be more. As the mother of an 8-year-old girl, I would love to see more female-specific programs available to her that are not religious based.”

“It would be nice to have an outreach program for early to mid-20-year-old women. Many don’t make decisions about their future while still in high school, and then by the time they’ve decided they would like to do something, they are overwhelmed with life and don’t know where to begin.”

“Utah is a state that hosts a spirit of volunteerism, which can lead to opportunities for community involvement and personal growth.”

“Yes and no! It’s a great place to grow, start a business, and connect with others, but there is a lack resources to support these efforts.”

“There is an opportunity for the state and leaders to provide more support and opportunities for girls and women.”

“I believe the doors are wide open. Educational opportunities, organizational support, independent mentoring are available—if you know where to look.”

Included in this category was a call for increased community resources that provide education and support on the topics of abuse and violence, including discussions on consent and safe dating:

“I truly believe knowledge is power. And I see opportunities for women and girls in Utah to be more educated on their finances, their bodies, how to be a leader, how to recognize signs of domestic violence, where to go for help with sexual harassment, etc. There is room to grow with proper education of resources.”

“The lack of consent education in schools prevents women and girls from knowing how to identify what their ‘yes’ and ‘no’s’ are in all aspects of life. We need to promote consent outside of just sexuality, but in everyday consent.”

“I wished there were more readily available resources or education on domestic violence. This includes emotional abuse. Women need to be informed about red flags, narcissism, love bombing, gaslighting, trauma bond, neglect is abuse, devaluation, discard, and helping them recognize these signs.”

“We have an opportunity in Utah to help women live in a culture where their body autonomy is respected and where child sexual abuse is not tolerated and aggressively punished.”

“Women suffer in silence simply because they [ask] for help, tell the truth, then are not believed and don’t receive help. Suffering in silence has become the norm. Let’s start listening and believing!”

Finally, participants called for providing resources and support that address the overall wellbeing of girls and women in Utah, including both mental health and reproductive health:

“An education center for reproductive health that is run by women would be fantastic. Or even a hotline.”

“Better mental health options are needed. Counseling should be more affordable for everyone.”

“The continued expansion (excluding the recent threat of significant restrictions on abortion care) of women’s independence in making reproductive decisions is empowering to allow women to pursue their goals while minimizing/eliminating the potential for unplanned pregnancies and the inherent difficulties that entails is also a significant opportunity.”

“Healthcare! We need more empathetic female doctors.”

“I think our children from K–12 should have an opportunity to learn how to help themselves get through life facing the day-to-day mental and emotional challenges. Many kids go home to dysfunction and chaos. If there’s opportunity at school to learn how to manage thoughts, ask for help, and understand where to find resources for emotional distress, maybe we can help prevent ‘some’ of the mental and health issues we are currently facing as a society.”

“Health and Wellness: Utah offers access to health and wellness resources, but awareness needs to increase. Supporting women’s physical and mental wellbeing is critical.”

### **Miscellaneous**

The Miscellaneous category functioned as a catch-all for comments that were not mentioned frequently enough to warrant a stand-alone category. This involved 23.6% (N=519) of the overall comments. A considerable number responded to the question of the opportunities available to girls and women in Utah with “I don’t know,” “I’m not aware of any,” or “I’m unsure.”

Several respondents identified Utah’s growing economy as a resource that is bringing more diverse perspectives to the state, which was viewed as an opportunity. This aligned with the call by some to recognize and address the unique experiences faced by women of diverse backgrounds. A number viewed sports and outdoor recreation as a valuable opportunity for Utah girls and women. On a more cynical note, some suggested that the best opportunity is for women and

girls to leave Utah. In contrast, others felt that there are plenty of great opportunities for girls and women and that they are treated the same as boys and men (as a reminder, women, men, and nonbinary individuals completed this survey). For example,

“Thankfully there are a lot of industries moving to, or growing their footprint in Utah, which helps infuse new opportunity for women and girls in this state.”

“Outdoor recreation experiences promote leadership [and] grit; knowing that they are capable provides opportunities.”

“I believe there is an increase of women of color and different sexual orientations in power, and this is another perspective that is so valuable.”

“I have two teenage daughters that mountain bike, and I have seen a huge increase in their confidence and leadership as part of the GRiT (Girls Riding Together) program.”

“Opportunities exist within sports and academics for young women to learn leadership skills and achieve success that will later translate in other areas.”

“Utah is a very frustrating place to live as a woman, politically and culturally.”

“Outdoor Recreation: Utah’s natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities can provide a space for personal growth, empowerment, and leadership development for women and girls.”

“BIPOC women in Utah are invisible; we have to be polite and work twice as hard just to be seen.”

“As someone who grew up in the state of Utah but moved away for over a decade and recently returned, I feel that leaving was integral to me stepping into leadership roles, entering a STEM career, and learning to use my voice unencumbered by gender norms. It’s disappointing that it took my leaving

the state to feel like a whole person who is capable of identifying and taking advantage of the opportunities presented to me.”

“The greatest opportunity for women in Utah is to work outside of it. Particularly for women with strong personalities.”

“Intersectionality: Recognizing and addressing the unique experiences and challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds is crucial. Considering intersectionality in policies, support programs, and initiatives can promote inclusivity and ensure that opportunities are accessible to all women in Utah.”

## 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 opportunities available to Utah women and girls. This document provides a summary of the opportunities identified by survey participants. A previous brief shared the perceived challenges faced by Utah women and girls. Subsequent briefs will provide more in-depth explorations of the various topics raised by research participants.

In summary, the brief has two purposes: first, we hope to educate readers on the various opportunities available to girls and women in Utah; second, by examining the types of opportunities that have been identified, we hope to focus efforts and resources to reinforce and expand the impact of those opportunities to mitigate some of the negative impact of the challenges the study identified. The 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!

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<sup>1</sup> 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>