Labor Force Participation Among Utah Women: A 2023 Update

Setting the Stage

Since 1950, women ages 16 and older in Utah have increased their labor force participation from 24.5%\(^1\) to 60.7%\(^2\). This is slightly higher than the overall labor force participation rate of US women, which is 56.1%\(^3\). According to the most recent US Census Bureau estimates from 2021, women in Utah now make up 44.2%\(^4\) (slightly higher than 43.9% in 2015)\(^5\) of the state workforce, which is lower than the US women’s share of the national workforce, 47.4%\(^6\) (which remains the same from 2015).\(^7\)

New to this update is the unique impact the global COVID-19 pandemic had on female employment nationally and in Utah. There was sharp decline in labor force participation for both US and Utah women in the first few months of 2020, but Utah women’s participation rate rapidly recovered as a whole. Interestingly, Utah women in older age groups (ages 35+), actually increased their labor force participation from January 2020 to December 2022, whereas women ages 16–34 decreased their rates of participation.\(^8\)

National data suggest women have also increased their engagement in the post-pandemic workforce, with a newly released Penn Wharton brief reporting that the post-pandemic employment rate for women recovered faster than the rate for men, with women’s employment rates reaching a historical high of 75.3% in September 2023.\(^9\)

Numerous factors influence Utah women’s participation in the labor force, such as accessing affordable, quality childcare (see UWLP 2023 Childcare Snapshot) and occupational segregation in lower-paying industries.

This research snapshot focuses on three key areas:

1) An overview of Utah women’s labor force participation and demographics,
2) An exploration of the industries and occupations where Utah women are most likely to work, and
3) A discussion of ways to increase Utah women’s success in the labor force.

Demographics

The most recent American Community Survey estimates that among adults ages 20–64, 71.6% of Utah women had worked at some time during the previous 12 months, on par with rates for US women (71.5%).\(^10\) For women ages 16 and over, the percentage of women “in the labor force” (which includes those who are unemployed but looking for work) in Utah is 62.5% compared to 58.8% in the US, a difference that is attributable to the state’s younger population.\(^11\) However, Utah women are far more likely to work part-time compared to their US counterparts: 36.4% compared to 28.7%. In fact, Utah continues to have the highest percentage of women who work part-time in the nation.\(^12\)

Utah women remain less likely than US women to work full-time, year-round: 38.5% vs. 41.1% (both up from 2015, when rates were at 35.7% and 41.8% for Utah and US women, respectively.)\(^13\) Utah women also continue to be considerably less likely to work than Utah men: 75.0% of Utah women worked in the previous 12 months compared to 87.5% of Utah men (ages 16 to 64). Utah men are also more likely to work full-time, year-round at 61.5%.\(^14\)

By the 2022 US Census Bureau estimates, Utah women continue to participate in the labor force at a higher rate than their US counterparts during their late teens and early twenties (see Table 1 for full details on labor force participation by age). However, beginning at age 25, when many Utah women are having children, their participation rate dips below the national average, and this lower rate of participation continues through age 54.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Utah Women</th>
<th>US Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16–19</td>
<td>59.9%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–21</td>
<td>80.2%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–24</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>79.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–29</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–34</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>79.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–59</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–61</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62–64</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–69</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census Bureau, 2022, American Community Survey.
Compared to 2015, labor force participation rates among women aged 54 to 61 have changed for Utah and US women, with more Utah women participating in the labor force than the national average during these ages. From ages 62 to 69, the national average of women participating in the labor force exceeded that of Utah women.\textsuperscript{15}

Although most Utah mothers do participate in the labor force, Utah mothers of young children are less likely to be employed than US mothers. In Utah, 67.7% of mothers with children under 18 years participate in the labor force, compared to 75.5% of US mothers.\textsuperscript{16} The most recent US Census Bureau estimates show that the percentage of working mothers in Utah and the US has increased over the past five years (see Table 2 for more detail). In 2022, 64.1% of Utah mothers with children under age 6 work (vs. 73.4% US), 52.4% of Utah mothers with children under age 6 and children ages 6–17 work (vs. 67.0% US), and 75.8% of Utah mothers whose children are all between the ages of 6–17 work (vs. 79.2% US).\textsuperscript{17} Utah continues to rank last in the nation for children under age 6 with both parents in the labor force.

Where women live in Utah also impacts women’s labor force participation rates. The counties with the highest female labor force participation are Grand (67.0%), Summit (66.0%), Tooele (64.0%), and Wasatch (64.0%). The counties with the lowest rates are Piute (42.0%), Rich (46.0%), Duchesne (49.0%), and Emery (49.0%).\textsuperscript{21}

### Table 2: Percentage of Mothers in the Labor Force by Age of Child(ren) from 2017 to 2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Under 6</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 6 &amp; 6–17</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only 6 to 17</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census Bureau, 2022, American Community Survey.

Marital status also impacts Utah women’s employment. Married women in the state are less likely to be in the labor force than the national average, but Utah women who are currently married are more likely to be in the labor force than the average US woman, as has been the trend. Additionally, Utah women who are separated, divorced, or widowed are also more likely to be in the labor force than US women with these same marital statuses. Specific labor force participation rates are as follows: 59.5% of Utah married women (vs. 68.5% US), 74.6% of Utah women who have never been married (vs. 68.6% US), 74.6% of Utah women who are separated (vs. 66.6% US), 67.2% of Utah women who are divorced (vs. 59.8% US), and 21.8% of Utah women who are widowed (vs. 18.7% US).\textsuperscript{19}

Utah women’s labor force participation also varies by ethnicity. Recent estimates calculated from the US Census Bureau show the labor force participation rate of women in the state by ethnicity: 66.2% of Asian women, 65.3% of Black or African American women, 62.7% of Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander women, 61.0% of White women, and 57.2% of American Indian women participate in the labor force.\textsuperscript{20}

A growing number of Utah women are employed in professional or managerial positions (39.6%), which often require four-year degrees and have higher wages and better benefits.\textsuperscript{23} However, Utah women continue to make up a high percentage of all workers in certain occupations, many of which require relatively lower skills and receive lower pay. According to 2022 US Census Bureau estimates, the three areas where Utah women are most highly segregated are healthcare support occupations (81.9% of workers are women, down from 83.4% in 2015), health technologists and technicians (78.1% female, up from 73.7% in 2015), and personal care and service occupations (75.4% female, down from 79.2% in 2015).\textsuperscript{24} In Utah, the median income for all workers in these three occupational areas are, $24,065, $36,481, and $19,463, respectively. The median income for each of these three female-dominated professions is below average for all professions in the state ($43,138).\textsuperscript{25} In contrast, the occupations in which the lowest percentage of jobs are held by women are construction and extraction occupations (3.3% female, up from 2.1% in 2015), installation, maintenance, and repair occupations (5.6%, up from 3.2% in 2015), and...
Increasing Utah Women’s Employment Success

As more Utah women are entering the workforce, whether because they want to or out of necessity, public entities, organizations, corporations, and schools can work together to support the advancement of women in Utah’s labor force. Utah women’s success can be increased by addressing the challenges they face (such as childcare and the gender wage gap) and supporting women-owned businesses.

First, increasing access to quality, affordable childcare will allow women the option of increasing their labor force participation. It is estimated that 11,540 more Utah parents could work if childcare costs were capped at 7.0% of income.28 Utah continues to be ranked 48th on the Childcare Index and 50th (an “F” grade) in the Work and Family category, according to a recent Status of Women in the States report.29 Increasing the availability of the number of childcare spots at institutions of higher learning, places of work, and in communities, as well as increasing affordability through policies and subsidies that support childcare providers and caregivers would allow parents to have access to the childcare they need (see UWLP 2023 Childcare Snapshot for a more in-depth look at how Utahns can address the childcare crisis).

Second, another challenge in Utah is the complex issue of the gender wage gap (the median female wage compared to the median male wage). Utah ranks worst in the nation.30 Data from 2022 indicates that women ages 16 and older with earned income during the previous 12 months made 60.8% what their male counterparts made.31

Third, Utah would also benefit by increasing support for women entrepreneurs. Since 2014, the number of businesses started by Utah women has increased by 21.0%. Women currently own 16.0% of businesses in Utah, and Utah is ranked second for percentage increase in women-owned businesses (77.0% increase).32 Over 89,000 businesses are women-owned, generating $15.7 billion a year in Utah.33 However, it is estimated that if women controlled half of all businesses in the state, Utah’s economy would grow by $27 billion in additional revenue (69.0% growth), add 25,000 new businesses (8.0% growth) and create 162,000 new jobs (10.5% growth).34 For additional information, see the UWLP’s white paper on Women-Owned Businesses in Utah: Status, Challenges, and Opportunities.

As more women in Utah earn at least bachelor’s degrees, specifically in high-paying growth industries, they will have more choices and opportunities for successful employment.35 Additionally, some women may benefit from exploring training and certification in fields that are traditionally male dominated yet lead to careers that are relatively high paying and flexible.

Conclusion

Women make up a significant proportion of the overall labor force in Utah, but many are employed in low-paying jobs with limited room for advancement. As women in Utah increase their labor force participation, as has been the ongoing trend, unique challenges such as occupational segregation, childcare inaccessibility, and the gender wage gap must be addressed. Finding ways to improve various factors for Utah women in the labor force will not only better their lives but also strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and the state as a whole.

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4 United States Census Bureau. (2021). Occupation by sex for the civilian employed population 16 years and over (S2401). https://data.census.gov/table?q=S2401&g=010XX00US_040XX00US49&y=2021

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13 United States Census Bureau. (2015, 2021). Sex by full-time work status in the past 12 months for the population 16 to 64 years. Utah and US (K20302). https://data.census.gov/table?q=K20302&g=010XX00US 040XX00US49
14 United States Census Bureau. (2022). Sex by full-time work status in the past 12 months for the population 16 to 64 years. Utah and US (K20302). American Community Survey. https://data.census.gov/table?q=K20302&g=010XX00US 040XX00US49
19 The previous snapshot contained statistics on ethnicity from IWRP’s “The Status of Women in Utah, 2015” Utah fact sheet. This has not been updated since, so these statistics were calculated using the US census microdata tool in order to calculate the labor force participation rate for those 16 and over who were either working or looking for work by ethnicity.

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