

Labor Force Participation: What Utahns Need to Know

RESEARCH SUMMARY

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

NO. 56 | JULY 31, 2026

Women make up a significant proportion of Utah's workforce, and their employment strengthens families, communities, businesses, and the state economy. Utah women's participation in the labor force has increased substantially over time, more than doubling since the 1950s, and the share of Utah women in the workforce is above the national average. Yet many Utah women work in lower-paying jobs with limited opportunities for advancement, and many face barriers that make full workforce participation difficult. Addressing these barriers can improve women's economic security while helping Utah employers meet workforce needs.

LONG-TERM GROWTH

Utah women's labor force participation has changed dramatically since the mid-20th century. The participation rate for women ages 16 and older increased from 24.5% in 1950 to 60.7% in 2023, exceeding the overall labor force participation rate for US women, which was 56.1% in 2023. Women in Utah make up 44.2% of the state workforce, and although this represents an increase from 2015, it remains below the percentage of U.S. women in the workforce (47.4%). These trends show meaningful progress while also highlighting that Utah women's employment patterns remain distinct from national patterns.

PART-TIME WORK

Utah women in the labor force are far more likely to work part-time than U.S. women. Among Utah women, 36.4% work part-time, compared with 28.7% of U.S. women, giving Utah the highest percentage of women working part-time in the nation. Utah women are also less likely than US women to work full-time, year-round: 38.5% compared with 44.1%. These patterns suggest that participation alone does not capture the full picture of women's economic opportunity, earnings, or advancement.

DEFINITION

Labor force participation is the share of working-age people (16 and older) who are "either working or actively looking for work."

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

WORK & COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp decline in labor force participation among women across the U.S. during the first few months of 2020. Utah women's participation rate recovered rapidly overall, though the recovery varied by age. Women of prime working age — ages 35 and older — increased their participation from January 2020 to December 2022, while women ages 16–34 decreased their participation during the same period. Nationally, women's workforce participation also strengthened after the pandemic, with prime-age women's employment reaching a historic high of 75.3% in September 2023.

WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

- Has grown significantly.
- Varies by age, parental status, marital status, race/ethnicity, and geography.
- Is shaped by childcare access, workplace flexibility, and social expectations.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age, parental status, marital status, race/ethnicity, and location all shape Utah women's labor force participation. Utah women are more likely than U.S. women to participate during their late teens and early twenties, but participation drops below the national average beginning at age 25 and remains lower through age 54.

Utah mothers of young children are also less likely to be employed than U.S. mothers: 64.1% of Utah mothers with children under age 6 work compared with 73.4% nationally. Married women in Utah participate at lower rates than married women nationally, while Utah women who have never been married, are separated, divorced, or widowed participate at higher rates than their U.S. counterparts.

Participation also varies by race/ethnicity and county, with the highest rates in Grand, Summit, Tooele, and Wasatch counties and the lowest rates in Piute, Rich, Duchesne, and Emery counties.



SEGREGATION

Utah women remain concentrated in certain industries and occupations, many of which pay below the state median. The occupations with the highest percentages of women are healthcare support occupations (81.9%), health technologists and technicians (78.1%), and personal care and service occupations (75.4%), and the median earnings in these areas are below the statewide median for all professions. In contrast, the occupations with the lowest shares of women—construction and extraction; installation, maintenance, and repair; and architecture and engineering—have higher median earnings.

GROWING PROGRESS

Increasing Utah women's workforce success requires attention to childcare, wages, entrepreneurship, flexible work, education, and career pathways. Affordable, high-quality childcare would allow more mothers to work or increase their hours. Addressing the gender wage gap is also critical, as Utah ranks worst in the nation and women working full-time, year-round earned 70.8% of what men earned from 2017 to 2021.

CLOSING THE GAP

Childcare access can expand workforce participation. Affordable, reliable, and high-quality childcare remains one of the most important supports for Utah women's employment. When childcare is unavailable or unaffordable, mothers may reduce hours, leave the workforce, or delay career advancement. Expanding childcare capacity and affordability can help more parents participate in the labor force in ways that meet their family and financial needs.

Flexible, high-quality work can improve retention and advancement. Utah women's high rate of part-time work indicates a need for employment options that provide flexibility without sacrificing wages, benefits, or opportunities for growth. High-quality part-time roles, returnships, hybrid work options, and family-supportive workplace cultures can help employers retain skilled workers and enabling women to remain connected to career pathways.

Broader career pathways can strengthen economic opportunity. Reducing occupational segregation and expanding access to higher-paying fields can improve women's economic outcomes. Employers, educators, workforce agencies, and community organizations can encourage women to explore STEM, skilled trades, entrepreneurship, leadership, and other growth fields. Increasing access to scholarships, mentorship, training, and supportive networks can help more women enter and advance in careers that offer long-term stability and mobility.

SUPPORT WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN UTAH

You can help Utah women's labor force participation by increasing awareness, advocating for equitable workplace practices, and supporting policies and opportunities that help women thrive in the workforce. See below for calls to action and resources that can help advance women's labor force participation and expand economic opportunities for women and families in Utah.

Data Sources: [UWLP Snapshot No. 52 \(2025\)](#), [UWLP White Paper No. 21 \(2026\)](#)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Learn More:** Explore resources in the UWLP Employment & Workforce Development [Resource Kit](#).
- **Review:** Find goals, perceptions, and community partners on the Workforce Development Spoke [webpage](#).
- **Get Involved:** Connect to the grassroots initiative, [A Bolder Way Forward](#).
- **Take Action:** Help move the needle and discover additional [Calls to Action](#) for individuals, groups, organizations and communities.



Encourage and support women around you to engage with mentorship programs that strengthen their skills, networks, and career pathways.



Regularly share workforce development [resources](#) with women to expand their awareness of training, education, and career advancement opportunities.



Educate yourself on the purpose and value of returnship programs and share this knowledge with women around you.

Learn more at www.utwomen.org

Authors: Dr. Yvette Young & Dr. Susan R. Madsen