

The Status of Women in Utah: Economic Choices & Challenges

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Introduction

Utah's economic future in 2016 is bright, with low unemployment, high population growth, and a booming economy. However, a number of reports indicate the opportunities and challenges individuals face in the state may differ for men and women.^{1, 2, 3} Some headlines have labeled Utah one of the "worst states for women", but existing data shows a more complicated picture.^{4, 5} In 2016, the YWCA Utah was awarded a grant from the Walmart Foundation to further explore these issues on behalf of the Women in the Economy Commission.

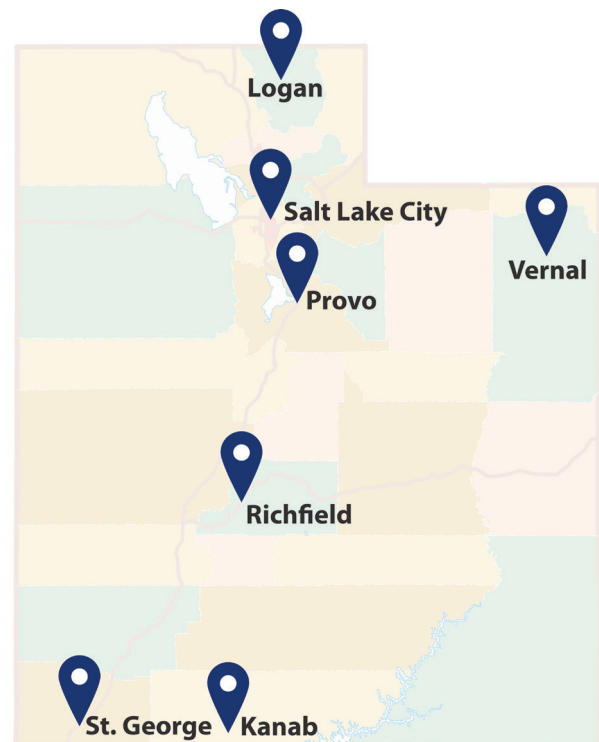
Data is readily available regarding women's educational attainment, employment status, income, and many other related variables, though limited in some areas. This existing data provides a foundational understanding of the status of Utah women now, where they've been, and where they might be headed if current trends continue. Many excellent reports on this topic are available from local non-profits, institutions of higher education, and the Women in the Economy Commission. These data sources fall short, however, in illustrating the motivations behind the choices women make, the barriers they face, and their desires regarding work and education. The intent of this research project is to gain better data on these challenges, barriers, and preferences. When paired with existing data, a clearer picture will emerge on the experiences of women in Utah and potential targets for policy change.

Methodology & Limitations

This research brief outlines the first phase of a two phase research project. The ultimate goal of the project is to produce a dataset from a state-wide random sample survey addressing the experiences of Utah women in work and educational pursuits. In order to craft a well-designed survey instrument on such a broad topic, focus groups were utilized to explore the experiences of women from around the state. This brief summarizes the findings of this qualitative research – conducted in the fall of 2016 – and lays the foundation for the survey research phase of the project.

Eleven focus groups were held across the state, with a total of 94 women. In most locations two groups were held, one for currently employed women and one for women not currently in the workforce. In a few locations only one group was held and included both employed and unemployed women. Figure 1 shows the locations of the focus groups: Kanab, Logan, Provo, Richfield, Salt Lake City, St. George, and Vernal.

Figure 1: Focus Group Locations



Group participants were recruited by two professional firms: Lighthouse Research and the Cicero Group. Recruiters limited the groups to women of working age (18-70) and attempted to get a diverse cross section in terms of income, race, marital status, and parental status. Sampling for focus groups is challenging, due to small sample sizes, a large number of relevant demographics to consider, and non-response. While the groups were diverse in terms of age, income, and parental status, challenges with recruit-

ing resulted in underrepresentation of the lowest income brackets, minorities, and young single women. Additionally, this phase of the research project intentionally oversampled rural areas to better understand how the experiences of women might differ in areas beyond the Wasatch Front.

The execution of these focus groups was a dynamic process. Recruiting criteria were adjusted along the way in order to try to compensate for low representation of certain groups (such as low income women). Similarly, the discussion guide was also adjusted along the way to emphasize different areas or to clarify parts of the discussion that required further clarification. Since the primary purpose of the groups was to gather information for survey questionnaire development and not to draft a comprehensive report, modifications to the discussion guide and recruitment process were warranted. The downside to these methodological choices is that each group differed slightly in the variety and types of women included as well as the exact topics discussed. Not all groups were asked about all topics, though at times women addressed such topics anyway in the course of their comments.

Certainly there are limitations in focus group research. Information gathered cannot be generalized to the population. This data should be treated as directional in nature as the research was designed with a narrow focus. While the eventual survey may be broader in nature, the focus groups targeted the topic areas of educational and career aspirations, occupational choice, equality, child care, and workplace benefits. Naturally, the flow of conversation often led to issues beyond these topics.

Findings

Public discourse about womens' workforce participation is – at times – prone to overgeneralization and stereotypes. In contrast, this research revealed the immense diversity of circumstances women in Utah face and the complexity of the decisions they must make regarding work throughout their lives. Participants spoke to a wide variety of experiences and challenges in focus group discussions. In reviewing the entirety of these diverse comments, four primary themes emerged as well as several secondary themes.

Child Care

Women raised the issue of child care repeatedly in the group discussions, focusing primarily on the lack of affordability, availability, and quality in Utah's current child care network. Respondents in every group mentioned that the high cost of child care is a significant barrier for women who wish to or need to work. Many women state

that when considering the high cost of childcare (particularly for multiple children) and weighing it against the compensation they receive for working, it simply wasn't worth it to stay in the workforce. For women outside of the workforce, finding adequate care arrangements is a barrier to re-entry.

Primary Themes:

1. Child Care
2. Flexibility
3. Monetary Benefits
4. Education

Women also consistently spoke of the overall lack of child care, noting that availability was an issue. The nature of the availability issues varied somewhat – some women noted the lack of options for child care outside of business hours to accommodate work schedules, many talked about long wait lists, some mentioned the sheer lack of options, and women in rural areas felt the availability issues are particularly acute where they live.

Figure 2: Issues in Child Care



The quality of child care is also of concern to many families. They voiced concerns over how child care quality is or isn't regulated by government entities. Some expressed a general feeling of discomfort with having others care for their children. The lack of affordable high quality options amplifies this discomfort.

For women who have the choice of whether or not to work these barriers often become a tipping point toward choosing to leave the workforce, even if they find work fulfilling and important. For women who have no choice but to work, they may be forced to accept lower quality child care options or leave their children in less than ideal environments. Women in several groups felt that the gov-

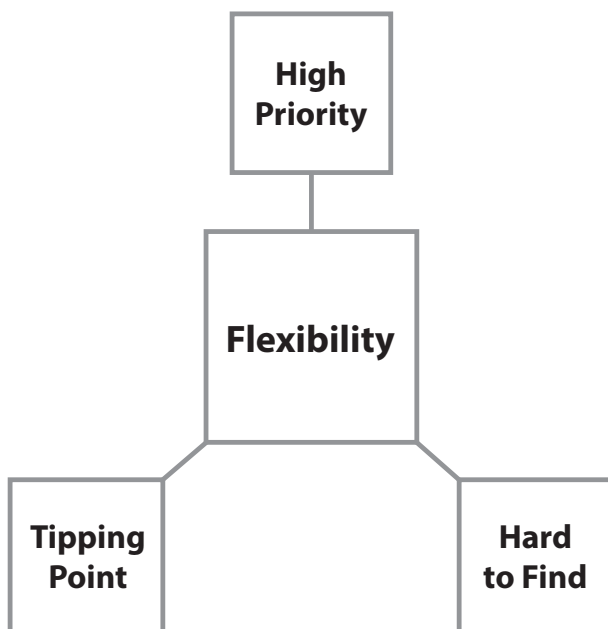
ernment could do more to ease the challenges parents face in locating adequate child care.

Lastly, focus group participants frequently mentioned the critical role social networks play in caring for children here in Utah. Utah women often ask family and friends to care for their children. Sometimes that care is done in exchange for pay; sometimes it is not. Sometimes family members are happy to spend time with the children, but often individuals take in children only out of obligation. Certainly, many women spoke of how fortunate they are to have family care for their children while they work. But for those where such arrangements are not possible, the challenge of finding and affording quality child care were the most frequently mentioned barrier in a woman's ability to work.

Flexibility

Flexibility is prized among many respondents and is considered critical in managing work outside of the home alongside other responsibilities. Women in nearly every group expressed that flexibility was a top priority as they considered job opportunities. Many women said they would sacrifice pay in order to find or keep a position with more flexibility. For some, flexibility is a more important job attribute than the nature of the work or opportunities for advancement. For women who have a choice about working, the inability to find flexible work can be a deal breaker; they opt out of working because they cannot find a position with adequate flexibility. In fact, a lot of focus group participants expressed they would like to work more, but are deterred by their belief that it is nearly impossible to find meaningful flexible work.

Figure 3: Flexibility Themes



This raises the question, "What does it mean for a job to be flexible?" For some it means flexibility in schedule – to accommodate doctor appointments or picking up children from school. For others, flexibility means having adequate time off for vacations or visiting family. Others said that having the option to telecommute, at least part-time, would save them commuting hours and give them greater flexibility to manage their lives. It is important to note that women begin to think about flexibility long before they have children: many women mentioned that preconceived ideas about flexible or family friendly careers had a significant influence on their education and career paths.

Some participants expressed a concern that taking advantage of flexibility at work is risky; they perceive that using flexibility, even when offered, may not be viewed kindly in the workplace and can hold a woman back in her career. They also said that employees who opt for part time or flexible arrangements may be seen as less committed to their jobs. Others acknowledged that flexibility in the workplace can be a challenge for employers to provide.

Throughout their working lives and especially during the years they are raising children, women in these focus groups greatly desire flexibility at work. Additional research is needed to clarify how the need for flexibility affects the choices women make and what aspects of flexibility are necessary in order to increase opportunities for women.

Monetary Benefits

Two additional benefits are critical factors for women at work: health insurance and paid time off. Focus group participants said that health insurance is a leading driver in why they work and one of the most important job benefits they consider when looking for new employment opportunities. Many women mentioned the importance of paid time off – particularly sick pay. While paid sick leave is a monetary benefit, it also relates to the desire for greater flexibility. Respondents said that the lack of sick pay at work or their anxiety about not being able to get away from work to care for their sick children kept them out of the workforce. Some women choose to work part-time in order to have greater flexibility and thus may not qualify for sick leave. This can make it harder to make ends meet if they must take unpaid time off to care for their sick children. Respondents who are currently out of the workforce said they prioritize being able to take care of their children when they are sick and fear employment obligations will not allow them to do so. Participants mentioned that increasing paid time off, specifically sick leave, would alleviate some of these concerns and allow more women to work and meet their families' needs.

Education

It is unsurprising that issues related to education would come up often in a group discussing women and the economy. Some participants were quite happy with the education they had received, but many were not. Respondents lamented the lack of guidance they received in choosing an educational and career path, and also said there is a need for greater assistance navigating post-secondary education. In eight out of the eleven focus groups women specifically said that there is a need for more school counselors and more effective counseling methods. Focus group members also mentioned the need to help young women consider broad career options, beyond the traditionally female dominated ones. In some groups, participants mentioned that they wished there was more career and education counseling beyond high school and several women noted that there is a lack of awareness regarding existing resources.

Respondents also reported that the cost of education is a big barrier as is balancing their schooling with other obligations. In a few groups participants suggested that there should be more emphasis on life skills courses in K-12 education in order to help young people have the financial and life management skills needed to succeed. While they were in the minority, some women simply said they had little interest in higher education.

Secondary Themes

The discussions in the eleven focus groups covered a wide array of topics. The findings above describe the most prominent themes, but there were several other topics that came up regularly and illustrate other issues for Utah women. They are outlined briefly below and are important factors in drafting the survey instrument.

Barriers to Re-entry: Women who have been out of the workforce for a period time often feel their skills or education are dated, inadequate, or irrelevant. Additionally, for many there is anxiety about how re-introducing work into their lives might interfere with their home and family life.

Career Sacrifice: Women make career compromises in order to accommodate their families. Some may prioritize their partner's schooling or career over their own. They also may cut back their hours or seek a less intensive career path in order to have the flexibility they desire for their families. While some women lamented this sacrifice, there was also agreement that such sacrifices are nearly universal among women and many respondents were happy to make the sacrifice.

Equality: Women raised many issues related to equality (and inequality) in the workplace. Some feel that Utah women have the same opportunities as men, but many disagreed. They shared experiences about unequal pay, discrimination, and feeling that women receive less respect in the workplace.

Maternity Leave: Many women expressed ways in which current leave policies are inadequate. Respondents shared experiences about returning to work before they had adequate time to heal and bond with their newborn; they returned early because they feared losing their job or simply could not afford to take time off unpaid. Some women reported more progressive leave policies at their jobs, while others shared stories of illegal and discriminatory practices.

Rural Issues: Women in rural areas value many of the unique factors about rural life. They want good opportunities, but want to retain the small town feel of their communities. Some of the barriers and issues mentioned in urban areas are compounded by unique factors in rural Utah.

Culture: Some aspects of Utah's unique culture have a significant impact on the decisions women make about their education and career. Group participants say the culture is changing, but there is still room for improvement so that all women feel fully supported in their career aspirations.

Parents / Home Life: Group participants reiterated the importance of parents and support at home. Individuals with more supportive parents had better guidance in education and career choices. Those who lack such support struggled much more. The environment in the home can also be stronger than cultural factors in influencing a woman's choices, according to those in the focus groups.

Conclusion

As this first phase of the research project concludes the attention of the Women in the Economy Commission Research Subcommittee now turns to creating a state-wide survey questionnaire, where input from the focus groups will be invaluable. In the coming months, the research subcommittee and the survey team at the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute will continue working on the survey questionnaire incorporating the feedback gleaned from the focus group process.

Women in Utah face many challenges as they engage in the economy throughout their lives. Some of the issues uncovered in the research echo barriers and issues faced by women nationwide, while others are unique to Utah. A representative random sample survey is needed to gener-

ate data on the prevalence of the issues raised in the focus group research. This initial phase of the project indicates that child care, flexibility, sick leave, and education are some of the leading issues facing women today. Better data on the complexities of how these issues effect women's workforce participation will help leaders in our community make more informed decisions about which steps can be taken to make things better for women in Utah in the future.

This research was funded by a grant from the Walmart Foundation to the YWCA Utah. The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah was commissioned to conduct and analyze the focus group research.

About the Women in the Economy Commission

The Women in the Economy Commission increases public and government understanding of the current and future impact and needs of the state's women in the economy and how those needs may be most effectively and efficiently met. The commission identifies and recommends policies, procedures, and programs to respond to the rights, needs and impact of women. It facilitates coordination of the functions of public and private entities concerned with women in the economy.

Commission members include:

Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, co-chair

Rep. Becky Edwards, co-chair

Senator Luz Escamilla

Senator Deidre Henderson

Judy Barnett, Utah AFL-CIO

Kathy Bounous, Department of Workforce Services

Anne Burkholder, YWCA Utah

Melissa Freigang, Logistic Specialties, Inc.

Jennifer Robinson, Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute

Ann Marie Wallace, Salt Lake Chamber

Endnotes

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