



# DAUGHTERS IN ZION

GENDER DISPARITY IN THE STATE OF UTAH  
A REGIONAL CASE STUDY  
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LYN JOHNSON, CRYSTAL TREJO GREEN, ALISHA GALE

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## Prologue

The members of our team have deep Utah roots: Utah has been our home and is the home to many of our sisters, aunts, nieces and friends. Thus, we are troubled by Utah's gender disparity and its impact on us and those we love. Our impetus for researching is: what does the future hold for the girls and women we care about? More importantly, how can we improve their prospects?

## 1. Introduction and Background (Understanding the Problem)

### *Women in Utah: Unequal, but Happy?*

As the rest of the U.S. makes gains in women's equality, Utah lags far behind. According to recent major studies,<sup>1</sup> Utah ranks last, or nearly last, in gender equality. Specifically, Utah exhibits a large gender gap in pay, executive positions, and political representation.

However, the exact status of Utah women has more nuance. Utah may rank low in gender equality, but in terms of happiness, women in Utah seem to fare well. Other studies have found that Utah women fare about average in terms of socio-economic well-being.<sup>2</sup>

What we see in Utah are two realities: while Utah women generally fall behind men in comparative measures, when looking at women in absolute terms, they seem content and economically well positioned. So, Utah is simultaneously a generally happy state with high levels of economic opportunity, but a very unequal one.

These two competing realities cannot coexist for long. One key impact of the inequality problem is a growing threat to Utah's economy. Companies in Utah are already facing difficulty attracting a diverse workforce. Utah will continue to have difficulty attracting outside companies as diverse workforces are seen as a critical component of business success (Lublin, 2018; Anonymous Interview, 2018).

Further, the disconnect between gender inequality and Utahns' satisfaction with the status quo masks a serious issue: Utah women do not have equal access to the state's institutions of power. The reported inequality statistics reveal that women lack sufficient voice within the state's political and economic systems. We can see this lack of access manifest itself in Utah's large

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. News & World Report, Wallethub, and 24/7 Wall Street have all ranked Utah 50th or 49th in rankings of gender equality equality (U.S. News & World Report, 2018; Bernardo, 2017; Frohlich, et al., 2014)

<sup>2</sup> According to Wallethub: Utah is the second happiest state (Bernardo, 2017), #18 of 50 in Best States for Working Moms (Kiernan, 2017), #25 for best states for women in general (McCann, 2018 )

gender wage gap, and in the disquieting statistics around Utah’s rates of domestic violence and rape, which exceed national averages<sup>3</sup> (Madsen, et al., 2017; Madsen, et al., 2016).

Clearly, gender inequality is a problem in Utah. How can Utah solve it? Why is there a disconnect between inequality statistics and contentedness?

### *Historical Context*

Since Utah’s founding in 1847 by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,<sup>4</sup> Mormon lifestyle and practices have exerted wide influence on Utah’s politics, culture, and economy.<sup>5</sup> As of 2016, for example, 63% of Utah residents were Mormon, and 88% of Utah legislators were Mormon (Sommerdorf, 2018). The connection between religious homogeneity and gender inequality at a national level is well-documented;<sup>6</sup> this connection is borne out in Utah.

From a macro level, the problem of gender disparity stems in part from the fact that the LDS Church, maintains a patriarchal structure.<sup>7</sup> In spite of this official hierarchy, Utah and the Church have a mixed record concerning gender parity, evidencing a complex history with this issue.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although the connection between gender inequality and domestic violence is not clear cut, evidence suggests legislatures with a high percentage of females are more likely to address women-centric issues, such as domestic violence and sexual assault (Alcorn, 2016) (Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 2006) (Zingg, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Officially The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often referred to as the “Mormon” or “LDS” church, with its adherents referred to as “Latter-day Saints” or “Mormons.”

<sup>5</sup> Much of the genesis of Utah’s current political and cultural reality began in an obscure corner of New York State. It was there, in 1830, that Joseph Smith founded the Church. Anti-Mormon persecution, including the murder of Joseph Smith, ultimately led to the exodus of its members from the United States proper. Under the direction of Brigham Young, the Church’s second prophet-president, the Church members formed their own political unit in the Utah Territory—the State of Deseret—and sought to become a “Zion society” functioning as a theocracy, with Salt Lake City as the capital and location of the Church’s headquarters (Ostman, 2018). Utah’s theocratic structure was dismantled when it gained statehood in the U.S. in 1895 (Ostman, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Countries with low religious freedom tend to have high levels of gender inequality, and this is true regardless of the dominant religion (Grim & Lyon, 2015). Utah is the most homogeneous religious state in the US; the next two states with a dominant religion, Rhode Island and Tennessee, have a lower pay gap; they also have less than religious homogeneity (44% and 43%, respectively). Tennessee’s low wage gap can be explained in part by its low overall wages (Swanson, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Women are excluded from priesthood ordination. Though women head the organizations for women, teen girls, and children, those leaders ultimately fall under the jurisdiction of male priesthood holders.

<sup>8</sup> For example, when Mormon pioneers settled Utah, they practiced polygamy. However, Utah was ahead of the U.S. in granting women the right to vote in 1895. It was forced to disavow polygamy and revoke women’s suffrage in order to become an official U.S. state in 1896. Also in 1896, Utah elected LDS woman Martha Hughes Cannon to its state senate, the first female state senator in the U.S. (Rosenlof, Celeste Tholen, 2018). During the post-World War II boom in conservatism, gender roles became especially entrenched in Utah. In the mid-1970s, the Equal Rights Amendment was five states short of ratification, and although Utah politicians showed initial support for the amendment, the Church opposed it for moral reasons and encouraged its members to do the same (Pemberton, 2018). Utah was one of 15 states to vote down the amendment, and without enough states supporting ratification,

## 2. A Problem in Disguise

### *Perceptions*

Based on insights gathered through first-person interviews with key stakeholders—Utah leaders, activists, and residents—we find several streams of conflict in defining and addressing the problem:

#### *Political Perspective*

A Republican senator dismisses gender inequality as illusory: with so many stay-at-home mothers, gaps in pay, representation, and leadership positions are inevitable. She has never personally encountered any discrimination in her long political career, and believes that fighting for gender equality increases acrimony between the sexes without any real gains for either. To her mind, the real issue of concern should be maintaining family stability, not advocating for women’s empowerment (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

#### *Academic Perspective*

One authority on Utah women’s leadership portrays Utah women as having an all-or-nothing mentality. Utah women, she says, too often see their life choices as school and work or family. With so few women visibly managing a career and family, Utah women cannot see a way to do both (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

#### *Family Perspective*

One Utah mother posits that mothers are happy staying at home with their children and appreciate a culture that empowers them to remove themselves from the job market. A low cost-of-living means that fewer families need two incomes to survive. She feels these women are not concerned about gender inequality because they do not experience any of its negative effects (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

#### *Student Perspective*

A male Utah native contends that many Utah women never look beyond the Church’s “ideal” of getting married and having children; those who do otherwise find little encouragement to do so.

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the ERA was not added to the U.S. Constitution. The most recent legislative session (22 January-8 March 2018) passed bills to send a statue of Martha Hughes Cannon to the U.S. Capitol Building (SCR 1), to strengthen domestic violence laws (SB 27 and HB 165), and to address postpartum depression (SCR 11); another bill attempting to examine the gender pay gap (SB 152) stalled in committee without a hearing.

Fields like finance are portrayed as bad for home life, which makes those fields less appealing to women (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

### *Activist Perspective*

A human rights activist describes many women in Utah as being anti-women women: they do not think women and men should be equal. She pinpoints the major problem to be the patriarchal culture espoused by the LDS Church (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

### *Community Organizer Perspective*

A Utah-based advocate of LDS women's issues noted that the extreme women's empowerment movements within the LDS Church have softened opposition to women's advancement. She finds more progress in leading incremental changes that don't elicit strong backlash and can garnish support from mainstream Mormons. But she also finds that many women are so entrenched in the current system that they are resistant to change (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

### *Business Perspective*

According to a corporate recruiter based in Utah, recruiting and hiring takes place through referrals. Men, not women, are empowered by these referrals. Further, the fastest-growing companies in Utah are in male-dominated fields (especially tech). The Utah-based employees of her international company generally oppose diversity recruiting. (Anonymous Interview, 2018)

### *Political Perspective*

A Democratic representative illustrates one reality of the gender imbalance: women in the legislature are vocal and successful, but there are not enough of them to be as effective as they would like. She noted that an effort to increase women in politics in the 1990s petered out and needs to be re-energized in order to encourage more women to enter politics (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

### *Advocate Perspective*

An advocate for women of color asserts that women of color are largely excluded from the conversation about gender inequality. She can relate instances of gender and racial discrimination in her own professional life, but points to gender discrimination (especially in the tech hub of Utah Valley) as a bigger obstacle than ethnic or racial discrimination (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

## *Business Perspective*

A business leader describes a business environment that recognizes the lack of diversity and is very keen to improve recruitment of women. He noted that women in Utah tend to marry young and have large families, which makes outside childcare unaffordable. He also recognized that women tend to be done raising children at a much younger age than is seen nationally and notes that businesses have not, up to now, utilized that large potential talent pool (Anonymous Interview, 2018).

## *Emergent Patterns & Behaviors*

Along with the myriad perspectives gathered via interviews and research, we see some recent trends that reinforce Utah's inability to mend the gender equality gap.

We see the idealization of stay-at-home motherhood give rise to a discrepancy between the work women are "supposed" to do, and the work women actually do. Utah is a hub for multi-level marketing and blogging, flexible fields that attract women and can boast of individual success stories, but where most participants never see any meaningful financial gain (Talking Points Memo, 2018). Also, many stay-at-home mothers invest heavily in volunteer work, because they feel volunteering does not count as "working"<sup>9</sup> (Anonymous Interview, 2018). However, women in Utah have been participating in the labor force at rates above national averages since 1980 (Israelsen-Hartley, 2017). The ideal myth of stay-at-home motherhood simply does not support the reality of motherhood in the state.

We also see overemphasis on women's physical appearances rather than their accomplishments. With a cultural emphasis on marriage and motherhood instead of education and careers, women face tremendous pressure to find and keep a spouse. The competition creates a loop, wherein women must conform to unrealistic beauty standards to optimize their chances of marriage and as more women conform, beauty standards become even more extreme<sup>10</sup> (Madsen, 2018).

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<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon contributes to Utah's high rates of volunteering, which top national rates (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> In fact, Salt Lake City has more plastic surgeons per capita than Los Angeles (Madsen 2018).

### 3. Current Solutions Landscape

#### Advocacy Groups

Currently, a diverse group of Utah-based organizations is addressing Utah’s gender disparity, with a varied approach. A sample of these organizations, their missions, and their limitations is listed below.

ORGANIZATIONS		FOUNDING	DESCRIPTION	SHORTCOMINGS
Utah Women and Leadership Project		2009	Research center that publishes reports, briefs, and recommendations. Hosts development events to prepare women for leadership roles. Facilitates networking and promotes collaboration.	Lack of publicity around reports. Much of the center's time is spent applying for funding grants.
Real Women Run		2011	Organized by the YWCA of Utah. Offers workshops to train women to run for office and seek appointments to boards and commissions.	Does too little to invite women not currently interested in politics.
Ordain Women Movement		2013	Movement to recognize inequalities within the Mormon church and petition for LDS women to receive the priesthood.	Highly divisive among church members. Many felt it was a radical feminist movement not in line with church devoutness, feelings that were magnified by leader's excommunication.
Women's Leadership Institute		2015	Sponsors the ElevateHer challenge to encourage companies to interview more female candidates. Offers a political development series to prepare and develop future female political candidates for local and statewide offices.	There are no accountability mechanisms for the organizations that sign onto the challenge.
Utah Women Unite		2016	Advocacy group with a specific focus on women of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and women of all abilities and socioeconomic statuses.	Due to politics of the state, their focus is relatively niche.
Utah Women of Color Council		2017	A subset of League of United Latin American Citizens; aims to improve economic conditions, educational attainment, political involvement, housing, health and civil rights of women of color and their communities.	Still a young organization, they've hosted few events directly related to their purpose.
Better Days 2020		2018	Uses historic examples of Utah women leaders to inspire progress. Led the campaign to send Martha Hughes Cannon's statue to the US Capitol, crafted a new school curriculum that includes women's history, generate art and memorabilia around women's influence in Utah.	Difficult to measure impact.

#### Current Activity Specific to the LDS Population

The LDS Church’s ecclesiastical leadership continues to be at the center of the gender inequality issue in Utah, sometimes in highly controversial ways.<sup>11</sup> Although the Church has publicly affirmed the ban on female ordination, it has made moves to visually highlight women leaders and has had a role in adding more perspectives to conversations about women’s roles in society.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, some members of the Church have created organizations outside of

<sup>11</sup> In 1995, Church leaders issued its third official declaration titled: “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” It includes language endorsing gender norms but has yielded various interpretations. Many LDS members interpret this statement as codifying the prohibition of mothers working outside the home. Others focus on the language approving individual adaptation as evidence of traditional gender roles softening.

<sup>12</sup> For example, women who serve as general leaders of the women’s organizations are now seated next to the male leaders on the stand at general conferences, they have been invited to pray at conference sessions, and their

official Church institutions with the goal of addressing the issue from within the membership.<sup>13</sup> The outside effort of members (both current and former) has pushed the boundaries of Utah’s conversation around gender.

## 4. Levers for Change

### *Opportunities*

Despite the efforts to create change, there remain problems preventing the women’s equality movement from getting a foothold. In addition to the gaps outlined in the solutions chart, we have identified at least five broad areas to target:

### *Male Advocacy*

The organizations advocating for women are uniformly led by women. While that is to be expected, both men and women need to support the concept that women deserve equality for progress to occur. While many men support women’s efforts to create change, there is a paucity of men who are at the forefront of this issue. Without outspoken advocacy from men, with their overwhelming share of power, women have very little chance of correcting the imbalance on their own (Anonymous Interview, 2018; Anonymous Interview, 2018).

Gap	Levers	Source
<b>Male Advocacy:</b> Low male involvement in activism (Interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasize the importance of men’s voice when recruiting for advocates.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Studies published in HBR</li> </ul>

### *Religious Communication & Messaging*

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pictures are featured in the semi-annual leadership chart distributed to all Church members. Though not specifically tied to the issue of women’s empowerment, the “I’m a Mormon” media campaign (launched in 2011) intentionally highlights a variety of women, including mothers with careers.

<sup>13</sup> The Ordain Women’s Movement (founded in 2013) sought to change church doctrine by way of peaceful protest. For example, it organized women to request tickets to the men-only Priesthood Session of the Church’s semi-annual general conference. The Church denied their requests. Many church members found the group’s message and methods highly divisive. The group’s founder, Kate Kelly, was excommunicated for apostasy in 2014. The Mormon Women Project (founded in 2010 by Neylan McBaine) collects the personal narratives of Mormon women to showcase their diversity and broad capacity on an online platform. And groups such as Exponent II (magazine publisher), Feminist Mormon Housewives (blog), Feminist Mormon Women of Color (blog), Aspiring Mormon Women (networking site), and Segullah (arts and letters journal) all seek to promote LDS women’s voices.

While the LDS Church’s influence on the issue of gender equality is keenly felt, we would not encourage Utah to become less religious. Instead, we hope Utah will serve as a model of how a state can increase equality without sacrificing religiosity.

That said, without the Church’s public encouragement of women in community and business leadership positions, many Utahns will continue to view women’s work outside the home as unnecessary at best and anathema to faith at worst. Thus, the Church’s explicit encouragement is vital to change.

Church leaders and non-church advocacy organizations should incorporate messaging that ties LDS doctrine and history to empowering women to appeal to more conservative LDS Utahns not currently targeted by campaigns.

Gap	Lever	Source
<b>LDS Church Communication:</b> Movements are Church-led or anti-Church (interviews).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Church and advocacy orgs. should emphasize empowering elements of LDS doctrine include female deity in discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UN and YWCA discussions on gender</li> <li>“Religion and Inequality in America”</li> </ul>

### *Inclusion*

Women of color need to be included in every conversation about gender. Communities of color have been very successful in creating economic opportunities for themselves; at 24% of the population, they have a substantial power to make changes and their exclusion ignores a vital source of strength (Anonymous, 2018).

Gap	Lever	Source
<b>Inclusion:</b> Include women of color in conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Existing groups reach out to UWOC and ensure a woman of color is part of decision-making body</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with the Utah Women of Color Council</li> </ul>

### *Business Community: Methods and Accountability*

Many Utah women may have large gaps in working experience due to childrearing, but since most women in Utah start families young, they are still at a prime working age when their caregiving responsibilities are waning. Business leaders need to do more to leverage that talent pool and bring women back into the workforce positioned for careers. Although hiring quotas might be a political nonstarter, evidence suggests paying women to apply for jobs and creating sponsorship programs for women already in careers may ameliorate the pay and leadership gaps (Anonymous, 2018) (Goodal, Osterloh; 2015).

Gap	Levers	Source
<b>Methods and Accountability:</b> Corporate challenges aren't based on research and lack accountability. (Interviews and observed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsoring programs help women advance</li> <li>• Pay to apply</li> <li>• Offer non-competitive incentives (job-sharing)</li> <li>• Monitor outcomes</li> <li>• Recruit women finishing childrearing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catalyst Research</li> <li>• Times Higher Education</li> <li>• Times Higher Education</li> <li>• Interviews</li> </ul>

### *Increasing Stem Pipeline*

Women in Utah are much less likely than men to major in fields with higher paying jobs, specifically STEM fields<sup>14</sup>. Promoting the success of women in STEM from primary school and beyond could help women land higher-paying roles in STEM fields that are also traditionally more tolerant of time-off and flexible schedules (AAUW, 2010).

Gap	Levers	Source
<b>Increasing STEM Pipeline:</b> Higher paid jobs reside in tech. Women test lower in math and don't pursue degrees for these jobs (State Research)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage growth mindset language for STEM education</li> <li>• Adjust college counselling to show flexibility in higher-paid jobs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• American Association of University Women</li> </ul>

## 5. Conclusion

Life in Utah is complicated for the women living there. While many women in Utah acutely feel the injustices of gender inequality, there remains a large population of women who feel removed from the problem. The economic prosperity of the state and the relatively high well-being of those living there obfuscate the urgency of the issue. The lack of widespread recognition notwithstanding, Utah's last-place status in gender equality progress is a problem it can no longer afford to ignore. The women of Utah deserve much more.

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<sup>14</sup> This is especially problematic because a large number of jobs in the state are with growing technology companies. Such a gap could be tied to early gender gaps in Utah's math performance during K-12, with women performing significantly worse than men, and stereotypes around STEM professions.

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