Research & Policy Brief

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UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP PROJECT

Women, Confidence, and Leadership: What Do Utah Women Leaders Think?

In 2014, the *Utah Women & Leadership Project* team collected data from various sources to understand some of the issues in Utah regarding women, confidence, and leadership. Why does this matter? Utah consistently ranks at or near the bottom of national studies on the status of women. For example, in 2013, the *Center for American Progress* released a report titled "The State of Women in America: A 50-State Analysis of How Women Are Faring Across the Nation."[1] This report ranked Utah last of all 50 states in terms of women holding positions of decision making and leadership.

Wall Street 24/7 recently published an article titled "The 10 Worst States for Women,"[2] using rankings from various sources on gender wage gap, percentage of women in state legislatures, percentage of women in management positions, poverty rate of women, and infant mortality rate. Although the state fared well on the last two, Utah was ranked as the worst state in the nation for women, with less than 31% of management positions held by women (2nd lowest) and only 16.3% of state legislators were women (6th lowest). It was also the 4th worst state with regard to pay, with the widest gap between genders (70 cents per dollar). Although many in Utah disagree with these three data points being used as the criteria for a sweeping determination of which states are the best and worst for women, these reports provide an impetus to explore the perceptions of Utah women about some of these issues.

The purpose of this brief is to report the findings of data collected from Utah women leaders on the following questions:

1. Why does Utah struggle with getting more women into leadership roles?
2. What do you think about Utah women, leadership, and confidence?
3. What confidence concepts or findings most deeply resonated with you? Why?
4. When have you struggled most in your life with confidence? What would have helped you?
5. What can we do to help more girls and women in Utah have more confidence and become leaders?

Data were collected from three sources. First, questions were posted on the *Utah Women & Leadership Project* (UWLP) LinkedIn site.[3] The resulting discussion was captured and themes extrapolated from individual responses. Second, notes were taken from table discussions after the September 23, 2014 event at Utah Valley University (UVU) titled, "The Confidence Crisis for Girls and Women."[4] Finally, a follow-up survey was sent to everyone registered for this event (approximately 400 women), and 78 individuals completed it. It is important to note that all data were collected from individuals who are interested in the topic and at least somewhat proactive in thinking about how to help girls and women gain confidence, voice, and leadership skills.

Utah's Struggle with Women in Leadership

The first question posted on the UWLP LinkedIn group during the summer of 2014 was "Why does Utah struggle with getting more women into leadership roles?" There were approximately 60 responses to the post, and we categorized comments into five primary themes with details listed for each (see Table 1).

Table 1: Utah's Struggles with Women in Leadership

Themes	Details
Personal Challenges	mindset that women should not be leaders; perception that men are better leaders; lack of confidence; lack of understanding or belief in their own worth and power; sensitivity to feedback; comfort in support roles
Lack of Education	not finishing college; encouragement to get married before finishing college; lack of encouragement to finish college after marriage; lack of early discussions about options; lack of investment and support for women to get degrees
Work-life	lack of women working full-time; women seeking more flexible work; not on management/leadership tracks because of priorities; childcare challenges; role incongruity beliefs; societal norms; LDS culture of women being supporters and not leaders
Lack of Support	lack of mentors, role models, sponsors, and other support; lack of networking and other opportunities; lack of investment in women's careers; lack of support from companies for women with families; LDS culture not encouraging women to be leaders
Workplace Challenges	discrimination and prejudice; lack of flexibility in Utah companies; career breaks; organizational cultures; view that only paid work counts on résumés; glass ceiling; reduced networking because men separate themselves in the workplace

Quantitative Findings

Ten quantitative questions were asked about various assumptions participants had regarding confidence and leadership.

The questions, statistical means (*M*), and standard deviations (*S.D.*) are found in Table 2. The scale used was 1 (strongly disagree) through 7 (strongly agree). It is important to note that about 71% of the survey respondents were 41 years of age or older, 65% were married, and 85% held bachelor's degrees or higher. The majority of the individuals who took the survey were leaders themselves.

Table 2: Confidence and Leadership Perceptions

Questions	*M*	*S.D.*
1. A lack of confidence is a problem for Utah girls and women.	5.8	1.08
2. Women need to be more confident.	6.3	.87
3. It is fine that men are more confident than women.	2.0	1.66
4. Men are supposed to be more confident than women.	1.5	1.08
5. Women don't need a lot of confidence to do what they should be doing.	1.3	1.23
6. Women should be leaders.	6.7	1.02
7. Men should be leaders more than women.	1.6	1.47
8. Men are born with more leadership qualities than women.	1.8	1.57
9. More needs to be done to help girls and women with becoming more confident.	6.6	.85
10. More needs to be done to help girls and women become leaders.	6.7	.85

The participants had strong perceptions that Utah women need to be more confident and that more should be done to help girls and women to become more confident and to become leaders. The higher standard deviations mean that there was a broader range of responses. If the sample had included a broader representation of the general population of women in Utah, there most likely would have been different results.

Confidence Concepts

One of the questions asked at the table dialogues after the September 23rd event was, "What confidence concepts or findings most deeply resonated with you? Why?" The question also appeared on the follow-up survey. In combining both data sources, the following is a summary (in rank order of the most commonly mentioned) of the nine concepts attendees felt were most helpful and empowering for them to consider. These can be useful in designing future confidence and leadership programs and initiatives:

1. Confidence and Related Terms. "Acting" and "doing" build confidence. We need to "act" to make a difference and to be effective leaders. Understanding the differences and relationships among confidence, self-esteem, self-compassion, optimism, and self-efficacy is critical. It helps us pinpoint where we have confidence and where we can make specific improvements (e.g., deflecting praise, reluctance to acknowledge one's strengths, clinging to past failures, negotiating pay, not pursuing opportunities, and seeking approval). People need to hear the truth to develop true confidence.
2. Gender Confidence Gap. Understanding gender differences with confidence is very helpful. Concepts of particular interest were the biological differences between men and women (e.g., brain and hormones), how women think and reason through success and failure, how they end declarative statements as if they were questions (i.e., upspeak), and how men blame external influences for failure and women blame themselves.
3. Perfectionism. Understanding the dark side of perfectionism for women was powerful; perfectionism is a confidence killer. It keeps us from taking risks, making decisions, moving forward, and gaining confidence overall.
4. Failure. It is okay to fail; failing actually allows us to learn and grow, and we should not be afraid of it. The more we gain confidence and "act," the more times we may fail. The statement "you can fail and not be a failure" is one we will use for years to come.
5. Mentors and Role Models. Mentors and role models (e.g., parents, church leaders, school counselors and teachers, and relatives) can have a major impact in the lives of girls and women. These individuals can encourage, support, build, and strengthen girls to help them become leaders.
6. Speaking Up. It is important that women speak up more in meetings and other situations that are typically dominated by men. Even though not speaking is a natural reaction for most women, we need to understand why, do it anyway, and teach others to do the same.
7. Communication Habits. It is important to understand the differences between men and women in terms of communication habits. This includes what women say to other women; Utah women can be judgmental and hurtful to each other. The other concepts like deflecting praise and a woman's struggle with accepting compliments ring true.
8. Rumination. Women spend far too much time overthinking or ruminating. We dwell on problems rather than solutions and focus too much on why we did certain things, how poorly we did them, and what everyone else was thinking about it. Rumination can freeze decision making and action, and it drains confidence. Learning that ruminating is a confidence-defeating habit can help us recognize this is a mindset that we can and need to change.
9. Confidence Is a Choice. A great deal of building confidence is simply a matter of changing one's assumptions

This brief was written by Susan R. Madsen (Professor of Management, Utah Valley University). The data were analyzed by Dr. Madsen and her research assistants (Lyndee Anderson, Matthew Kelly, and Jessica Rodriguez). For questions, contact Dr. Madsen at madsensu@uvu.edu or (801) 863-6176. For additional information: www.uvu.edu/uwlp

and perspectives. Confidence *is* a choice, and, therefore, lack of confidence is also a choice. Seeing confidence as a matter of choice removes it from the passive arenas of genetics, upbringing, and socialization. Our thoughts create neural pathways in our brains. We can change our brains in ways that will affect our thoughts and behavior. This knowledge helps us to reflect on the choices we are making and set goals to make choices that will increase our confidence, sphere of influence, and leadership aptitudes.

Personal Confidence Struggles

The second confidence question was two-fold: When have you struggled most in your life with confidence? What would have helped you gain confidence through these experiences?

When have you struggled most in life with confidence? Six primary themes emerged during data analysis:

1. Growing Up. Over half of the survey participants said that they had their greatest struggles with confidence between 6th and 12th grades. Factors that most negatively affected confidence included unstable or unsafe homes, dysfunctional families (i.e., abuse and neglect), poor relationship with parents, parents who expected "pointless perfectionism," sibling rivalry, not being able to be involved in activities, being teased and judged at school, not feeling like their ideas or thoughts mattered, and changes such as family moves or divorce of parents. Women shared common traits found in people who were negative influences: authoritative, aggressive, jealous, unfair, belittling, overprotective, and undermining. These were people who felt they always knew what was best, took advantage of others, put people down to make themselves look better, and did not encourage others to try new things and/or make mistakes.

2. Motherhood. The next most common response was that motherhood had decreased confidence levels. As one respondent said, "Motherhood has been the biggest blow to my self-confidence." There is great pressure to compare oneself to others who seem "perfect" and who appear to always be happy. Other negative influences included the monotony of being a homemaker, low income, feeling isolated, lack of external rewards for good performance, spouse assumptions that their work is more important, and domestic violence and divorce. Some women said they feel "forced" to fit into one mold (e.g., nurturer, child bearer, teacher, and homemaker). As one stated, "We feel guilty if we are not naturally good at these things, do not conform perfectly to that role, or have a desire to do something different."

3. Failure. Failure was a major confidence killer for many women. They had ruminated over failures and mistakes for years and still struggle. They did not know that failure could actually be a positive thing and that learning from failure could provide powerful growth opportunities.

4. Body Image and Appearance. Many women struggled with being overweight and/or feeling they were not beautiful. Others felt that they needed to look perfect, and since this was never possible, their "confidence took a beating." Other things mentioned were hormonal and physical changes, eating disorders, and depression and anxiety.

5. Mixed Messages. Participants also said that the mixed messages that women in Utah receive are hard on women's confidence. For example, one individual said, "We are told 'We need your voices. They need to be heard in your homes, in your neighborhoods, in your ward councils, and in your communities.' But then we get the feeling that we should not speak too loud, too often, or about the wrong topic.'"

6. Workplace Challenges. We often feel "less than" or devalued in the workplace, which is hard on our confidence. Women are not as vocal, only apply for a promotion if they are fully qualified, struggle moving up the career ladder, feel frustrated with those who undermine them, and have to deal with both conscious and unconscious biases.

The second part of this question was as follows: *"What would have helped you gain confidence through these experiences?"* The most frequent responses can be grouped into the following three categories:

1. Influential Individuals. More positive influences would have helped (e.g., women leaders, parents, family members, employers, co-workers, teachers, neighbors, and friends). The best people would have been those who had a personal stake in our success, valued our uniqueness, provided us with honest feedback (particularly about our strengths), were "safe to turn to," saw our potential and believed in us, told us we could accomplish our goals, and were confident, supportive, strong, dependable, and empowering.

2. Training and Development. More education is needed earlier in life about confidence and leadership. It is important to remind ourselves of our previous successes. We need to be told (and to remember throughout life) that we can do hard things and that mistakes and failures are actually important learning opportunities. Other important concepts to learn include the importance of taking action, making choices, celebrating victories and mistakes, communicating assertively, speaking up and expressing ourselves, taking risks, overcoming challenges, setting and accomplishing significant goals, learning to work hard and pushing forward, knowing that eventually you will not always be the "new kid on the street," listening to your internal desires to improve and succeed, and recognizing and developing gifts and talents.

3. Other. Respondents also mentioned the following actions that helped their confidence grow through the years: practicing meditation, mindfulness, and other mind-body practices; having self-compassion; gaining a knowledge of self-care; learning more effective ways to communicate;

feeling a sense of belonging through joining a club, team, group, or network; having a confidence-building hobby; learning to do hard things and seeing improvements; participating in online communities and community education programs; attending and graduating from college; using knowledge and expertise to help others; and gaining the trust and respect of others.

Proposed Solutions

Responses from the final question, "*What can we do to help more girls and women in Utah have more confidence and become leaders?*" were gathered from all three data collection sources (i.e., LinkedIn, table dialogues, and online survey).

LinkedIn

The LinkedIn responses to this question can be sorted into five solution areas.

1. Educate girls, young women, and parents more proactively on confidence, life options, and the importance of college and careers.
2. Work to help more women graduate from college (e.g., scholarships, grants, lower tuition costs, mentoring, and other programs).
3. Educate employers about these issues, including the importance of hiring women, offering flexible work arrangements, and valuing their various life experiences.
4. Train more mentors, provide more training and development opportunities, and help make people aware of these programs.
5. Work together to help make a difference and continue the conversations more extensively.

Survey and Table Dialogue Data

Six primary themes emerged from the qualitative data gathered from the combined survey and dialogue table notes. There is interesting overlap between these data and those listed above. First, the most frequently mentioned solution is to *help more women in Utah to attend and complete college*. People discussed the importance of educating women in every stage of life and how education creates both paid and unpaid opportunities and confidence. Attending college helps build confidence, and having a degree provides knowledge and skills that lead to independence and self-reliance for individuals and families. Innovative strategies need to be explored by schools, colleges, and universities to get messages to girls and women of all ages to attend and complete college, whether they come in from high school or are non-traditional students. Also, in addition to traditional scholarships and grants, innovative and groundbreaking financial solutions need to be discovered.

The second most frequently mentioned solution was to have *more female role models, mentors, and sponsors* in all sectors and in the community at large. Women in any professional position, community role, or leadership area should reach out, encourage, and support girls and women to give them more opportunities. Respondents specifically recommended encouraging and training more effective mentors and bringing awareness to existing high-quality training programs; further, new programs need to be designed and offered for potential mentors and role models. Helping influential individuals strengthen their mentoring and coaching skills (e.g., listening, providing honest feedback, and nonverbal communication skills) can also be helpful.

Third, participants believe that we need to *change the way our society views women*. Currently there are narrow views of what a "good woman" should do and how she should behave, particularly in Utah. All women have value in whatever role or combination of roles they chose (e.g., workplace, home, community, and politics). According to one participant, "Judging women based on a narrow set of criteria is not helpful for anyone." Others underscored the importance of all women having choices and knowing their options. It is important for girls and women to understand that it is not "all or nothing." For example, they can combine having children and finishing college, working a flexible part-time job and raising families, or even running for a political office as a full-time homemaker. Women need to understand that they have many options, and discussing these options with girls and women is critical. As one participant stated, "Women need to know that being a wife and mother is righteous and good, but that women must add on to that a college education and being involved in the community."

The fourth most common response relates to *increasing community support and resources for girls and women*. This includes increasing encouragement and support through media, programs, initiatives, and policy changes. Communities can proactively seek women leaders for strategic volunteer and paid positions. More training and development events and programs that will educate and empower girls and women are needed. For example, talking more about confidence will help women discuss it more openly within their spheres of influence and create added awareness. Topics of critical importance include confidence, individual worth, perfectionism, fear of failure, viewing struggles and challenges as opportunities, the importance of risk-taking, the unhealthy need for continuous praise, setting goals, and how to give and receive helpful, honest feedback.

Fifth, there must be *widespread awareness* of these confidence and leadership issues for women, and they must be *discussed openly* and more often. In the Utah culture, these topics are typically not discussed. Men and women alike need accurate information and openness. Understanding confidence issues can help people with their own development, but it can also assist them in helping and empowering others (e.g., children, friends, and coworkers). Confidence building starts when children are young, and influencers need to understand it to guide children positively in their early years.

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Finally, *men need to partner with women on these initiatives, and women should be supporting and encouraging each other*. A number of respondents discussed the need to partner with men and to make them allies for empowering girls and women. If men understand the gender confidence gap, the unconscious bias, the benefits that women bring to companies and other types of groups and organizations, and the need for mentoring and supporting women more effectively, they can be a strong force in moving things forward in Utah.

Although most Utah women do believe in supporting each other, a number of participants mentioned that there are women—some who are in key positions—who do not support efforts, initiatives, and programs for women. According to one participant, "Too many women tear each other down, while women need to stand together for the greater good."

Conclusion

This brief has provided the latest findings on women leaders' perceptions of the following: (1) why Utah struggles with getting more women into leadership roles, (2) perceptions of women, confidence, and leadership; (3) important and helpful concepts regarding confidence, (4) when women have struggled most with confidence, and (5) what women think Utahans can do to help more girls and women gain more confidence and become leaders. Insights gained from these data will be helpful for Utah leaders and residents to better design efforts to strengthen confidence, develop leadership, and empower women to influence more effectively in the realms in which they choose to engage. It is also important to note that this brief has focused primarily on internal barriers for Utah women, such as self-confidence. Yet, this is only one piece of the puzzle in helping women in our state.

There are a host of external barriers identified in the scholarly and professional literature (e.g., unconscious bias, hostile bias, workplace discrimination, and organizational policies and practices) that need further exploration and potential work within this state. Some efforts are already underway to address some of these issues. For example, the 2014 legislative bill created the *Women in the Economy Commission* for the purpose of increasing public awareness of women's impact on the state's economy. However, much more needs to be done to help Utah girls and women become confident participants and leaders in all sectors of society.

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[1] Chu, A., & Posner, C. (2013). *The state of women in America: A 50-state analysis of how women are faring across the nation*. Retrieved from http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/StateOfWomen-4.pdf.

[2] Frohlich, T. C., Kent, A., & Hess, A. E. M. (2014, October 16). The 10 worst states for women. 24/7Wallst.com. Retrieved from http://247wallst.com/special-report/2014/10/16/the-10-worst-states-for-women-2/4/

[3] Found at https://www.linkedin.com/groups/Utah-Women-Leadership-Project-6683851?home=&gid=6683851&trk=anet_ug_hm&goback=.gmp_6683851

[4] Details about past Utah Women & Leadership Project events can be retrieved from http://www.uvu.edu/uwlp/events/uwlpevents.html