The Status of Women Leaders in Government – Utah Counties

Setting the Stage

Recent events underscore the need for government—and democratic governance processes in general—to embrace diversity at all levels. Organizations with diverse leadership teams, including both women and men, have proven to be more innovative and resilient, make better strategic decisions, and have an increased capacity for problem solving. The benefits of gender equity can be found in any organization, including government structures such as state legislatures, city councils, and state and local bureaucracies.[1]

American democracy is grounded in the idea of representation.[2] Governments embody this concept by encouraging agencies to employ a workforce that shares the demographic characteristics of the communities they serve, referred to as a representative bureaucracy.[3] This is based on the idea that people are shaped by their social experiences and, as a result, the social experiences of the government's workforce matter.[4] In fact, the presence of a diverse public workforce can "signal the inclusion of group interests, attitudes, and experiences in government decision making and build government legitimacy."[5] Since local officials are often the "face" of government with the most direct interactions with residents, it is important that those faces represent the diversity of the community.[6] This applies to all levels of government in Utah, including county organizations.

Yet, according to a host of research and policy briefs from the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP), Utah is below the national average in terms of women holding leadership roles within nearly all settings (e.g., business, education, politics, and state boards and commissions). Research has shown that Utah's socially conservative culture reinforces gender-based expectations and that those expectations play out in the experiences of Utah women.[7] While the situation remains a concern, there has been slight progress on some fronts and sectors within the state. However, the status of women in Utah county government has been unclear until now.

Overall, women hold 42.5% of supervisory, managerial, and executive leadership positions in Utah's county governments.

Study Background

To determine how reflective Utah's government organizations are of the communities they serve, Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) researchers undertook a groundbreaking study of women in leadership positions at the county level of government. The goal was to document a baseline of the number and percentage of women in leadership roles within Utah's 29 counties that could be used in the future to learn where progress has been made. This brief is the second in a series that quantifies women leaders who work in Utah's public sector. A previous brief looked at women in leadership positions in the State of Utah, and a third brief will focus on women in leadership positions in Utah's municipalities.

Data for this research were collected through several methods. First, emails or phone calls were made directly to the human resource manager and/or another individual in county leadership for each of the 29 counties. If, after multiple attempts, there was no response, we submitted a formal information (GRAMA) request through the Open Records Portal website.[8] Because data collection occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many government organizations had staff working from home, it was necessary at times to rely on the county's website to identify leadership positions as well as the gender of the person currently in that role. However, our preference was to collect data directly from county staff. The information requested from each county included a list of leadership positions; the gender of the person currently in each leadership position; whether the position was considered elected, appointed, merit, or time-limited/part-time; and the total number of employees for the county.

Researchers supplemented this information by analyzing the data by multi-county districts (MCDs) and class size. In addition, each leadership position was reviewed and categorized based on the responsibilities and policies for the agency with which it was associated and according to the level of leadership based on the title. The categories ranged from supervisory roles to elected officials. The results of these additional analyses provided valuable insights into the status of women leaders within Utah's 29 counties.

We received (or found through county websites) information on 1,957 leadership positions, representing 15,684 employees in Utah's 29 counties. While 1,957 leadership positions were identified, some of the positions were vacant. Gender representation was available for the 1,946 positions reflected in this study.

Findings Overview

Overall, 42.5% of all supervisory, managerial, and executive leadership positions within county governments are held by women, which is slightly higher than the 39.3% recently reported for State of Utah employees. Admittedly, the leadership composition of each county is different; however, it does compare well to the Census data from 2016 that show women in the US hold 40.2% of all "management occupations." We

were unable to locate recent comparable data specifically for women in county government from other states. Table 1 lists the percentage of women leaders in counties within the state of Utah.

Table 1: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah by County

County	Female	Male	% Female
Beaver	8	15	34.8%
Box Elder	13	48	21.3%
Cache	13	30	30.2%
Carbon	10	10	50.0%
Daggett	14	13	51.9%
Davis	88	115	43.3%
Duchesne	14	20	41.2%
Emery	39	14	73.6%
Garfield	18	13	58.1%
Grand	27	36	42.9%
Iron	10	26	27.8%
Juab	3	14	17.6%
Kane	14	26	35.0%
Millard	15	20	42.9%
Morgan	18	24	42.9%
Piute	1	7	12.5%
Rich	6	6	50.0%
Salt Lake	364	373	49.4%
San Juan	17	25	40.5%
Sanpete	4	11	26.7%
Sevier	9	35	20.5%
Summit	31	34	47.7%
Tooele	21	31	40.4%
Uintah	14	22	38.9%
Utah	4	25	13.8%
Wasatch	9	22	29.0%
Washington	29	66	30.5%
Wayne	4	7	36.4%
Weber	11	30	26.8%
Total	**828**	**1118**	**42.5%**

In Utah, the county with the highest percentage of women leaders was Emery at 73.6%, followed by Garfield (58%), Daggett (51.9%), Carbon (50%), and Rich (50%). The counties with the lowest percentage of women in leadership positions were Piute (12.5%), Utah (13.8%), Juab (17.6%), Sevier (20.5%), and Box Elder (21.3%). There is a statically significant difference among counties in terms of the presence of women in leadership roles.

National and global researchers have discussed the leaky leadership "pipeline," where comparable numbers of men and women start as front-line employees, yet as they progress through the leadership ranks, there are fewer and fewer women.[9] The problem is not simply the overall numbers of women in the public sector workforce; it is how those numbers are

spread across the different levels of leadership. Hence, to quantify the levels of leadership held by women, researchers categorized each leadership position based on its title into one of four levels: Elected official, Executive (chief deputies to elected officials, and department directors), Senior ("middle management," including division directors, assistant or deputy directors, and managers), or Front-line (supervisors, managers, administrators, coordinators, and analysts) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Leadership Level

Leadership Level	Female	Male	% Female
Elected Official	89	216	29.2%
Executive	134	211	38.8%
Senior	116	198	36.9%
Front-line	489	493	49.8%
Total	**828**	**1118**	**42.5%**

Women comprise 49.8% of front-line leadership positions, 36.9% of senior leadership roles, 38.8% of executive leadership positions, and 29.2% of elected roles. Following national trends, these data suggest that the higher one goes in county government, the less likely it is that women will be in leadership. That said, the slightly higher percentage of women in executive leadership vs. senior leadership is unexpected. A deeper analysis of equity efforts or cultural dynamics within counties could uncover more details about these phenomena. Also, see the Appendix for a table that lists the percentage of women leaders in each county by leadership level.

To put Utah's statistics in perspective, 2013 national employment data for the public sector show that women leaders represent less than one-third (30%) of executive leadership positions,[10] which could be compared to the "executive" level in Table 2 (38.8%). In addition, a 2014 national report showed that women held 19.8% of all top managerial positions in city and county government.[11] With these comparisons, Utah counties may be faring well. Yet, we do not have recent comparable data, so we are unsure if this is the case.

Multi-County Districts, Class Size, and Typology

Researchers then analyzed the data based on the clustering of counties into multi-county districts (MCDs). MCDs include Bear River (Box Elder, Cache, and Rich counties), Central (Juab, Millard, Piute, Sanpete, Sevier, and Wayne counties), Mountainland (Summit, Utah, and Wasatch counties), Southeastern (Carbon, Emery, Grand, and San Juan counties) Southwestern (Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, and Washington counties), Uintah Basin (Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah counties), and Wasatch Front (Davis, Morgan, Salt Lake, Tooele, and Weber counties). Table 3 lists the percentage of women leaders in these regions.

When counties were grouped by MCDs, the highest percentage of women in leadership (52.2%) was found in the Southeastern MCD (which includes Carbon, Emery, Grand, and

San Juan counties), and the lowest percentage of women in leadership (27.6%) was found in the Bear River MCD (which includes Box Elder, Cache, and Rich counties). Further data analysis shows a statistically significant difference between gender and region in Utah.

Table 3: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Region (MCDs)

Region	Female	Male	% Female
Bear River MCD	32	84	27.6%
Central MCD	36	94	27.7%
Mountainland MCD	44	81	35.2%
Southeastern MCD	93	85	52.2%
Southwestern MCD	79	146	35.1%
Uintah Basin MCD	42	55	43.3%
Wasatch Front MCD	502	573	46.7%
Total	**828**	**1118**	**42.5%**

A similar approach was taken to explore the number of women leaders based on the population of the county. This was done by using the categories of County Class (see Table 4). Researchers relied on information compiled by the Utah Association of Counties to determine county class size.[12] The only first class county currently in the state is Salt Lake County, and the second class counties are Davis, Utah, Washington, and Weber counties. The third class counties are Box Elder, Cache, Iron, Summit, Tooele, and Uintah counties. The fourth class counties are Carbon, Duchesne, Juab, Millard, San Juan, Sanpete, Sevier, and Wasatch counties. The fifth class counties are Beaver, Emery, Garfield, Grand, Kane, and Morgan counties. Finally, the sixth class counties are Daggett, Piute, Rich, and Wayne counties.

Table 4: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah County Governments by County Class

County Class	Female	Male	% Female
1st class (population of 700,000 or more)	364	373	49.4%
2nd class (population of 125,000–700,000)	132	236	35.9%
3rd class (population of 31,000–125,000)	102	191	34.8%
4th class (population of 11,000–31,000)	81	157	34.0%
5th class (population of 4,000–11,000)	124	128	49.2%
6th class (population of 4,000 or less)	25	33	43.1%
Total	**828**	**1118**	**42.5%**

Analyzing the data this way showed that the first class county (Salt Lake County) and fifth class counties (Beaver, Emery, Garfield, Grand, Kane, and Morgan) were more likely to have women leaders. In fact, both had almost half of their leadership positions held by women (49.4% and 49.2%, respectively). In comparison, women who work in fourth class counties (Carbon, Duchesne, Juab, Millard, San Juan, Sanpete, Sevier, and Wasatch) appear to be less likely to hold a leadership role (34.0%).

Research on the public sector has consistently pointed out how gender plays a significant role in the way government organizations are structured and staffed. Grouping government agencies by typology—or the types of responsibilities and policies they oversee—is a useful way to bring attention to the gendered environments in government organizations.[13] For this study, each leadership position was categorized based on the agency with which it was associated into one of the four common typologies: administrative, distributive, redistributive, or regulatory.[14]

Public administration scholars have identified "masculine" agencies as primarily administrative (providing general infrastructure support), distributive (dealing with the general population, including agencies such as transportation and energy), and regulatory (focusing on implementing control and regulatory policies, including agencies such as business and economic development, labor, defense, transportation, taxes, budget, criminal justice, natural resources, agriculture, and environmental quality). "Feminine" agencies are mainly redistributive (reallocating money and services), and they include agencies such as education, social services, healthcare, the arts, and veteran's affairs. Because departments and divisions tend to adopt masculine and feminine divisions of labor, where a woman works often impacts her career progression.[15]

National data show that women in local government make up 75% of employees in redistributive agencies, 31% in regulatory agencies, and 22% in distributive agencies, showing a clear segregation based on agency type.[16] An analysis of agency typology showed that counties in Utah clearly reflect a gendered division of labor (see Table 5).

Table 5: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Typology

Typology	Female	Male	% Female
Administrative	103	212	32.7%
Distributive	12	79	13.2%
Redistributive	348	221	61.2%
Regulatory	364	606	37.5%
Total	**827**	**1118**	**42.5%**

Utah's data rankings are similar to the national data across all governmental agencies: redistributive agencies have the majority of women in leadership positions at 61.2%. In contrast, county agencies considered to be distributive showed only 13.2% of leadership positions held by women. Further data analysis shows a statistically significant difference between gender and typology in Utah county governments. This aligns with data found in the State of Utah agencies, with women holding 60.1% of leadership positions in redistributive agencies and only 14.6% of leadership in distributive agencies.

Overall, when analyzing the leadership data by typology, it becomes clear that women have a better chance of being promoted in predominantly feminine organizations, which are

usually redistributive agencies. That is important because redistributive agencies are typically much less involved in informing public policy. Considering the significant and far-reaching decisions made by top-level government leaders, the fact that women hold comparatively few influential leadership positions outside of redistributive agencies is a concern, considering the overall impact of Utah women.

Employee Number and Classification

National research suggests women are more likely to be leaders over smaller organizations, have fewer people to supervise, and have less financial responsibility.[17] To determine whether that applied to county governments in Utah, analysis was done to determine the number of women leaders in counties based on the number of overall employees in the county (see Table 6).

Table 6: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Number of County Employees

Number of Employees	Female	Male	% Female
0–99	25	33	43.1%
100–199	116	123	48.5%
200–249	103	214	32.5%
250–549	117	205	36.3%
550–1,299	103	170	37.7%
1,300–7,300	364	373	49.4%
Total	**828**	**1118**	**42.5%**

Researchers found that county governments that had 1,300–7,300 employees had the highest percentage of women at 49.4%, and the only county included in this range was Salt Lake County. Interestingly, county governments that had 100–199 employees (Beaver, Emery, Kane, Millard, Morgan, and Sanpete) followed closely at 48.5%. County governments with the lowest percentage of women leaders were those that had 200–249 employees (Box Elder, Carbon, Duchesne, Grand, Iron, San Juan, and Sevier) at 32.5%.

Finally, researchers tried to determine whether the classification of a leadership position had any connection to gender (see Table 7). Position classification was defined as being either elected, appointed, merit, or time-limited/part-time. In government agencies, appointed positions are assigned by a high government official and often convey the heft of trust or authority. Merit positions are attained through the process of promoting and hiring government employees based on a competitive process that determines their ability to perform a job, rather than on political connections. Finally, time-limited/part-time positions are linked to specific parameters regarding the position, either by tenure or hours worked.

While the largest percentage of women leaders were classified as merit (45.6%), county governments in Utah had a considerable number of women in appointed positions (40.4%). This mirrors the data found for the State of Utah, which had 42.3% of women in appointed positions. These are

considered to be positions of trust and authority; thus, they provide women an opportunity to influence public policy.

Table 7: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Position Classification

Position Classification	Female	Male	% Female
Elected	82	211	28.0%
Appointed	110	162	40.4%
Merit	621	740	45.6%
Part-time/Time-limited	15	5	75.0%
Total	**828**	**1118**	**42.5%**

Recommendations

By looking more closely at women's representation in leadership positions within county governments, we can see where local governments are doing well and where there are opportunities to improve the diversity of the workforce. A more diverse local government workforce provides Utah's county leaders with a greater range of perspectives when identifying and implementing public policies and can be a valuable tool in creative problem solving and complex decision making. Strategies implemented by some Utah counties have already led to greater diversity in the leadership ranks; however, there are also opportunities for improvement. In addition to the eight recommendations already published in the recent State of Utah research and policy brief, we offer the following ten recommendations:[18]

1. Begin establishing a "tone from the top" that is firmly committed to supporting and advancing women, with an eye to advancing women of color. Embed inclusivity in the organization's behaviors, attitudes, culture, and goals.
2. Make a visible commitment, such as the ElevateHER Challenge and/or the Parity Pledge, and publicize this decision.
3. Provide training to staff that offers strategies and tools to support gender equity in the workplace (e.g., hiring, performance evaluations, promotions, and committee participation). This includes incorporating trainings regarding unconscious bias and articulating ways to properly handle gender bias in the workplace.
4. Explore gender representation at all levels of leadership by collecting and sharing the data, both inside and outside of the organization.
5. Ensure diverse hiring interview panels to reduce potential bias in the hiring process, with a goal of 50% women and 50% men.
6. Pay attention to who is mentioned during discussions of projects. Take the opportunity to acknowledge contributors, especially those from underrepresented groups. Taking the time to say their name and acknowledge their work when they are not around reinforces their contributions to the organization.

7. Recommend women, particularly women of color, for stretch assignments and speaking opportunities. This can magnify their visibility within the organization, increase confidence, enhance social networks, and build credibility—all of which can help women be better positioned for future promotions.
8. Analyze and change gendered language that may be used in policies, procedures, job descriptions, and other written reports and documents.
9. Train both women and men to react/respond appropriately when they encounter gender bias in language, behavior, or policy. Responses can be made in a professional manner and still address the issue effectively.
10. Recognize and verbally acknowledge the leadership that women provide. This is a subtle yet powerful way to interrupt gender bias and shift social expectations regarding women as leaders.

Conclusion

Overall, in county governments across the state we found higher percentages of women in front-line leadership roles employed by agencies that were considered to be redistributive (such as aging and senior centers, arts, parks and recreation, libraries, 4-H, youth services, social services, and health care). We also found women were more likely to be in leadership roles if they worked for either 1st class or 5th class counties, as a part-time/time-limited or merit employee. While some counties are doing well in making their leadership more representative and inclusive, other counties show a distinct disadvantage for women who want to advance, particularly in non-traditional agencies.

Recent national discussions have created heightened awareness of the importance of listening to the voices and experiences of women, particularly women of color. The current lack of equal representation in the leadership ranks in some segments of Utah's county governments stands in stark contrast to the goal of a diverse government workforce. Acknowledging the relationship between gender and leadership can translate into behavior-changing actions.

As Utah's county governments embrace a diverse workforce and incorporate a variety of perspectives into the decision-making process, they will be in a better position to more effectively deal with the complex challenges that face our communities. In addition, county leaders will benefit by encouraging creative solutions that consider a variety of experiences and perspectives. By identifying persistent challenges, we are better positioned to correct current imbalances and give women an opportunity to be equally represented across all local government agencies and leadership levels.

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APPENDIX
Counties of Utah Leadership Pipeline
Percentage of Women by County

County	% Women Front-line Leaders	% Women Senior Leaders	% Women Executive Leaders	% Women Elected	% Women Leaders Overall
Beaver	0.0	100.0	33.3	41.7	34.8
Box Elder	25.0	10.0	33.3	9.1	21.3
Cache	27.3	0.0	47.1	33.3	30.2
Carbon	100.0	0.0	71.4	30.0	50.0
Daggett	28.6	100.0	71.4	33.3	51.9
Davis	48.5	45.7	29.6	9.1	43.3
Duchesne	58.3	0.0	50.0	30.0	41.2
Emery	83.3	66.7	72.7	44.4	73.6
Garfield	85.7	71.4	62.5	22.2	58.1
Grand	42.1	46.2	47.1	35.7	42.9
Iron	16.7	20.0	30.8	33.3	27.8
Juab	50.0	0.0	0.0	22.2	17.6
Kane	42.9	25.0	50.0	20.0	35.0
Millard	33.3	14.3	83.3	50.0	42.9
Morgan	66.7	60.0	36.8	40.0	42.9
Piute	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.5	12.5
Rich	100.0	0.0	33.3	50.0	50.0
Salt Lake	52.3	37.7	42.9	47.6	49.4
San Juan	41.7	77.8	36.4	10.0	40.5
Sanpete	0.0	0.0	25.0	30.0	26.7
Sevier	20.0	16.7	25.0	20.0	20.5
Summit	80.0	50.0	26.1	46.2	47.7
Tooele	38.9	66.7	41.2	27.3	40.4
Uintah	42.9	33.3	41.7	36.4	38.9
Utah	100.0	16.7	9.1	9.1	13.8
Wasatch	60.0	50.0	0.0	22.2	29.0
Washington	42.6	7.1	23.5	10.0	30.5
Wayne	0.0	0.0	66.7	28.6	36.4
Weber	0.0	23.5	40.0	11.1	26.8
Total	**49.8%**	**36.9%**	**38.8%**	**29.2%**	**42.5%**

Note: Large percentages may be due to counties reporting only one or two individuals in each leadership role category. For example, Utah County reported 4 women in leadership of a total of 29 leadership positions for the entire county. Only one position was categorized as Front-line, and since that person was female, the data reflect 100% of Utah County's front-line leaders being women.