



## The Economic Circumstances of Sexual Minority Women in Utah

### Setting the Stage

When thinking of gender inequality in Utah, many people immediately consider the difficulties of combining motherhood and employment,<sup>1</sup> sexism in everyday life,<sup>2</sup> or recent studies that have deemed Utah to be the “worst” state for gender equality.<sup>3</sup> Further, women of color have different experiences than white women, as they experience racism and gender discrimination at the intersection of both.<sup>4</sup> Inequalities in economic outcomes based on race and ethnicity are well documented<sup>5</sup> and shed light on the fact that “women” are not a monolithic category. This snapshot focuses on an axis of inequality that has been studied less frequently, especially in the context of Utah: sexual identity.

“Sexual minority women” is defined in this report as those who do not identify as heterosexual (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual). They may face all the obstacles associated with identifying as a woman, in addition to possible discrimination or other disadvantages linked to their sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup> Despite the absence of explicit laws against homosexuality in the United States,<sup>7</sup> the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner highlights cases of homophobia<sup>8</sup> in the United States to illustrate global patterns of victimization of sexual and gender minorities.<sup>9</sup> There is also widespread discrimination based on sexual orientation in the workplace<sup>10</sup> and education.<sup>11</sup> In 27 states, no explicit laws protect people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity; Utah has partial protections.<sup>12</sup> The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)<sup>13</sup> produces state-level information about the experiences that challenge LGBTQ+<sup>14</sup> students, and Utah-specific data show a vast majority are regularly exposed to anti-LGBTQ+ comments.<sup>15</sup> However, less is known about the economic status of sexual minority women in Utah.

This report provides a descriptive overview comparing heterosexual and sexual minority women in Utah in the domains of educational achievement, labor force status, and income. The goal is to highlight areas where sexual minority women may be particularly economically disadvantaged. Unfortunately, specific data regarding gender identity such as transgender and nonbinary Utahns is virtually nonexistent,<sup>16</sup> but they are known to be extremely margin-

alized economically and disproportionately affected by violence.<sup>17</sup>

Researchers analyzed data from the Utah Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) from 2020 and compared Utah data to national 2020 BRFSS data. BRFSS questionnaires and data tabulations are freely available through the Utah Department of Health (UDOH).<sup>18</sup> Participants self-identified their sexuality (“Do you consider yourself to be: straight, lesbian or gay, bisexual?”). In the publicly available data, participants are grouped into two categories: heterosexual/straight and everyone else (lesbian or gay, bisexual, other, and “don’t know”). Data presented here are weighted and age-adjusted by the UDOH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which allows comparisons between the national and Utah BRFSS sample and, in the latter, between heterosexual and sexual minority women.<sup>19</sup> Age-adjustment is important with self-identification as younger women are more likely to identify as a sexual minority. Since the BRFSS national survey did not ask for sexual identity like the Utah-specific survey, all women from the national sample are compared to Utah heterosexual and sexual minority women.

This research snapshot focuses on three key areas:

- 1) Educational attainment,
- 2) Employment status, and
- 3) Household income.

### Educational Attainment

Nationally and globally, education has been linked to economic prosperity<sup>20</sup> with a clear link between individuals’ education and their earnings potential.<sup>21</sup> Data from the American Community Survey (ACS) for those 25 and older suggest that Utah women do better than US women in graduating from high school and starting college. However, through the years, Utah women have not graduated with bachelor’s or higher degrees at the same rate as US women. For a more detailed analysis of the trends in Utah women’s education see the Women in the Economy Commission Report from 2018.<sup>22</sup>

The 2020 BRFSS survey (of women 18 and older) also shows that more Utah women attain some education after

high school than US women—67.8% compared to 61.8% (see Table 1).<sup>23</sup> More Utah women (39.9%) have attained some post-high school education or associate’s degrees compared to US women (32.0%); however, Utah women lag slightly behind US women in attaining bachelor’s degrees or higher. A similar rate of all Utah women combined, heterosexual Utah women, and US women graduate from college. The proportion of those who did not graduate from high school is lower among Utah women than all US women included in the BRFSS samples.

**Table 1. BRFSS Age-Adjusted Educational Attainment Rates, 2020**

Education	Utah			US
	All Women	Heterosexual Women	Sexual Minority Women	All Women
Below High School (HS)	8.2%	6.8%	24.4%	12.2%
HS Dipl. or GED	24.0%	23.9%	28.0%	26.0%
Some Post HS or Associate’s	39.9%	41.2%	29.0%	32.0%
Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	27.9%	28.1%	18.6%	29.8%

*Note:* Sample sizes include All Utah Women (N=5,451), Utah Heterosexual Women (N=4,833), Utah Sexual Minority Women (N=390), and All US Women (N=217,109).

The data show that almost one-quarter of Utah women who identify as being a sexual minority do not graduate from high school—roughly twice the national average and four times higher than Utah women who identify as heterosexual. The gap persists through all levels of higher education: 47.6% of sexual minority women have some education beyond high school compared to 69.3% of heterosexual women, and sexual minority women substantially lag behind heterosexual women in attaining both some post-high school/associate’s degree (29.0% compared to 41.2%) and bachelor’s degrees or higher (18.6% compared to 28.1%).

### Employment Status

In many respects, Utah women are similar to US women in terms of employment status (see Table 2). Not surprisingly, the largest employment status category is “Employed” across all categories. The proportion of those who reported being “out of work” is substantially lower for Utah women compared to US women in the BRFSS sample, but the rates for sexual minority women in Utah who report being out of work for more than one year is similar to the national level.

While BRFSS data are slightly different from other employment statistics due to different sampling, it is still helpful to compare groups in the BRFSS samples. According to the data, Utah has a higher proportion of homemakers

compared to the US, and there is no meaningful difference in the proportion of homemakers between sexual minority women and heterosexual women in Utah. Importantly, the dataset did not provide a way to distinguish between full-time and part-time employment.

**Table 2. BRFSS Age-Adjusted Employment Status Rates, 2020**

Employment Status	Utah			US
	All Women	Heterosexual Women	Sexual Minority Women	All Women
Employed	48.2%	47.9%	49.5%	42.2%
Self-employed	7.3%	7.5%	**	6.5%
Out of work (>1yr)	1.5%	1.5%	2.3%	2.4%
Out of work (<1yr)	4.0%	3.9%	3.4%	5.6%
Homemaker	16.1%	16.3%	14.1%	9.7%

*Note:* Percentages and sample sizes for those with other employment statuses (e.g., full-time student, retired) are not reported. Sample sizes: All Utah Women (N=3,596), Utah Heterosexual Women (N=3,170), Utah Sexual Minority Women (N=257), and All US Women (N=125,850). The \*\* refers to data deemed unreliable by UDOH.

### Household Income

According to ACS 2019 data, the median household income in Utah was \$75,780. Table 3 illustrates the three income categories included in the 2020 BRFSS dataset (the Utah-specific survey included brackets above \$50,000; see Table 4 for more detail). Overall, the most common household income brackets in the BRFSS data is \$50,000 or more for women, across all sub-samples.

**Table 3. BRFSS Age-Adjusted Household Income Range Rates, 2020**

Household Income	Utah			US
	All Women	Heterosexual Women	Sexual Minority Women	All Women
\$0–\$24,999	18.9%	17.3%	38.6%	27.9%
\$25,000–\$49,999	21.2%	21.4%	19.0%	26.6%
\$50,000 or more	60.0%	61.3%	42.4%	57.1%

*Note:* Utah household income categories were collapsed to allow a national comparison. Sample sizes: All Utah Women (N=4,261), Utah Heterosexual Women (N=3,932), Utah Sexual Minority Women (N=281), and All US Women (N=170,497). See Table 4 for complete income data for Utah.

Importantly, Utah sexual minority women are more commonly in the lowest income bracket. Further, 61.3% of Utah heterosexual women are in the highest income bracket compared to 42.4% of Utah sexual minority women and 57.1% of women nationally among BRFSS respondents. ACS 2019 data lends context to these numbers, finding that

61.6% of all US households and 70.0% of all Utah households have an income of \$50,000 or more.

Table 4 illustrates the more detailed income brackets of the Utah-specific BRFSS survey, lending more insight to higher incomes (over \$50,000). Sexual minority women in Utah are much less likely to have a household income of \$75,000 or more compared to heterosexual Utah women, and are almost twice as likely to be in the lowest income bracket (\$24,999 or less) than heterosexual Utah women.

**Table 4. Utah Age-Adjusted BRFSS Household Income Range Rates, 2020**

Household Income	Utah		
	All Women	Heterosexual Women	Sexual Minority Women
\$0–\$24,999	18.9%	17.3%	38.6%
\$25,000–\$49,999	21.2%	21.4%	19.0%
\$50,000–\$74,999	17.4%	17.9%	12.5%
\$75,000 or more	42.6%	43.4%	29.9%

Note: Sample sizes include All Utah Women (N=4,261), Heterosexual Women (N=3,932), and Sexual Minority Women (N=281).

While Utah women in the BRFSS sample seem to be living in less affluent households than expected given ACS data, the BRFSS sample shows stark household income differences between heterosexual and sexual minority women. Importantly, household income as a measurement may not reflect possible partnership differences between heterosexual and sexual minority women, where individual income might be a more applicable measurement.

## Recommendations

Data on Utah women suggest that sexual minority women are economically disadvantaged with respect to three key areas: educational attainment, employment status, and household income. According to research, improving anti-discrimination measures—and specifically inclusion efforts—are critical to reducing disparities.<sup>24</sup> For example, one inclusive strategy would be to increase the availability of rigorously designed, high quality unconscious bias training, which could help more Utahns better understand the differences in sexuality among Utahns. Another strategy is learning about and supporting local organizations and initiatives that focus on uplifting and sustaining sexual and gender minority Utahns. Finally, ensuring that sexual minority girls and women feel—and are—welcome in all educational arenas will provide access and means for economic advancement.

Overall, when compared to Utah women more generally, sexual minority women are more likely to have lower levels

of education and live in low-income households. The following recommendations can help create more access and opportunity for these women.

*First*, those who engage in outreach efforts for people who earn lower incomes, are underemployed, and lack education, should keep in mind that there may be more sexual minority women within their client base who need assistance. They can avoid language that focuses on assumptions that may not be relevant to their current situation (e.g., references to husbands, boyfriends, children). Additionally, according to some sources, sexual minority women may be more open than heterosexual women to be recruited in “gender atypical” occupations, which could benefit both workers and employers who seek to fill vacancies.<sup>25</sup>

*Second*, the large gaps in educational attainment between sexual minority women and their heterosexual counterparts show that the documented unsafe environments that LGBTQ+ people experience in Utah schools<sup>26</sup> have a long-term impact, which is in line with the racial and ethnic disparities in Utah’s higher education system.<sup>27</sup> Although progress has been made regarding the inclusivity in high schools for sexual minority students, experts state that the lower rates of transition to colleges and universities compared to their heterosexual counterparts is often linked to a lack of support from family members, high school and college faculty and staff, and other key influencers in easing the transition to and completion of college education.<sup>28</sup>

*Finally*, although the data are unable to illustrate the extent to which differences in unemployment and household income are the direct cause of discrimination, strengthening anti-discrimination policies and reexamining probationary (“at will”) employment periods—during which termination can occur without the employer stating a cause—could protect sexual minority women from employment discrimination and ensure more inclusive workplace environments. It would also be helpful for future studies of discrimination to analyze data that is disaggregated by gender and race/ethnicity.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Reducing inequality that stems from sexual identity is not just a matter of working towards a more just and equitable Utah. While discrimination and exclusion are harmful for the people who experience it, discrimination and exclusion also deprive the state, employers, and Utah families of the talent, ideas, and resources that sexuality minority women have to offer. It continues to be important to remember that when we strengthen the impact of *all* Utah residents, including sexual minority women, we can strengthen Utah’s workplaces, educational institutions, communities, and the state as a whole.



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- <sup>13</sup> Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network. (2021). <https://www.glsen.org/>
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- <sup>15</sup> GLSEN. (2021). *School climate for LGBTQ students in Utah*, 1-2. <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Utah-Snapshot-2019.pdf>
- <sup>16</sup> The BRFSS data used for this snapshot does not allow a disaggregation by gender identity. A 2016 study estimates that only about 0.36% of Utahns identify as transgender, but other studies suggest that, in most populations, anywhere from 0.1% to 2% of people are gender diverse. The term gender diverse is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of identities that do not neatly fit in the categories of “woman” or “man” or “male” or “female,” including those who are transgender and nonbinary. These rates are likely higher among young people. Transgender and non-binary Utahns may or may not be sexual minorities, but they are very likely more affected by discrimination and exclusion. A disaggregation by race was not possible due to sample size, but it is important to note that Utah residents who are racial and ethnic minority women, women with disabilities, and other marginalized groups face many disadvantages that cannot be reflected in this analysis.
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