

Is Utah the Most Sexist State? No

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the claim that Utah is “the most sexist state” in the United States, as suggested by a WalletHub report ranking it lowest in “Women’s Equality.” Utilizing an economic analysis from the Austrian School perspective, this study scrutinizes the data, metrics, and conclusions of reports by the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP). The analysis focuses on distinguishing statistical disparities from sexism, proposing that observed gender inequalities in Utah are largely influenced by cultural and economic factors, particularly the state’s high marriage rate and traditional gender roles. Contrary to the notion that sexism predominantly drives gender disparities, the paper argues that personal choices and subjective value theory play significant roles in shaping these outcomes. The study highlights the importance of considering cultural context, individual preferences, and the marital asymmetry hypothesis when interpreting gender-related data, challenging the assertion that Utah’s gender disparities are primarily due to sexist attitudes. The findings suggest that Utah’s gender gaps in areas such as income and workforce participation are more accurately attributed to the state’s unique cultural and economic landscape rather than pervasive sexism.

Keywords: wage gap, sexism, marriage, discrimination.

1. Introduction

According to an August 2021 report on WalletHub, a website for personal finance, Utah was ranked as the lowest scoring state for “Women’s Equality” (McCann 2021a). This has led to the claim that Utah is “the most sexist state” in the U.S. or “the worst state for women.”¹ Referencing the WalletHub report, two papers were published by the Utah Women & Leadership Project— an organization whose mission is “to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women.”² The first of the papers is a “Research Snapshot” on the gender pay gap that was published in October (Winkel, et al 2021) while the second (Madsen & Madsen 2021) is a more thorough analysis of the statistical data regarding the disparities between men and women in areas such as the workplace and politics.

The present paper provides a critical economic analysis (particularly from an Austrian School perspective) of the data collected, the metrics used to measure sexism, and the conclusions made therein. It is important to note that the current work does not make claims about the organization’s mission or the organization itself; rather the focus is on disputing the claim that Utah values men more than women to a greater degree than any other state.

In Section 2, we discuss Discrimination & Disparities. Section 3 is given over to demonstrating that metrics showing statistical inequalities do not necessitate sexism. The burden of Section 4 is to offer the marital asymmetry hypothesis. We conclude in Section 5.

2. Discrimination & Disparities

Most discussions surrounding oppression, sexism, racism, and many other forms of discrimination are centered around statistical disparities. The claim is oftentimes something like “because group X doesn’t make the same amount as group Y, we must conclude it is because of prejudice and discrimination.” In order to measure whether members of a particular group are experiencing “unfair” treatment or being excluded from certain outcomes solely based on factors they have no control over, e.g., sex, race, or disabilities, we must define such prejudicial behavior.

For example, discrimination in and of itself is not a bad thing. In his book *Discrimination and Disparities*, economist Dr. Thomas Sowell (2018, p.30) illustrates different types of discrimination, “an ability to discern differences in the qualities of people and things, and choosing accordingly” (Discrimination I) and the “narrower, but more commonly used, meaning — treating people negatively, based on arbitrary aversions or animosities to individuals of a particular race or sex” (Discrimination II). The first of these definitions is an innocent form of preference that we demonstrate on a daily basis for things like food or entertainment.

Sowell’s central thesis is that the existence of statistical disparities between certain groups does not necessitate the existence of Discrimination II, i.e., prejudice based on *external factors* such as skin color or sex. The NBA is overwhelmingly dominated by African American men,³ nevertheless it would be absurd for anybody to claim that the NBA is racist against White and Hispanic men; furthermore, it would be even more ridiculous for the NBA to try and equalize the demographics so that each race is represented “fairly” or equally.

There is no dispute here regarding the existence of certain disparities such as gender pay gaps or female- vs male-owned businesses. However, we cannot conclude that these inequalities are the result of overwhelming numbers of male Utahns holding sexist views against female Utahns. There must be evidence and data behind those numbers proving that the present outcomes are a result of discrimination based on *external factors*. In this paper we will define “sexism” as the prejudice against

one group solely based on their sex while discounting such *internal factors* such as economic productivity, knowledge, experience, etc.

Culture and Economics: The Key Role of Subjective Value Theory

There exist several different competing economic theories which explain what determines the value of a good. It is our view that the correct theory was that of the Austrian School: all values are subjective and are imputed from the mind of the consumer or economic actor. Subjective value theory comes from the basic economic axiom that humans use different means to achieve specific ends. It is the desire to achieve those ends that then determines the value of certain means for the economic actor. These subjective preferences ultimately determine the economic structure of different societies. For example, meat eaters purchase meat because they value its consumption. Vegetarians will not pay anything for meat because they place higher value on the life of animals. A society predominantly made up of vegetarians would likely end up making the few meat eaters pay higher premiums for meat because the capital equipment for production would likely be tied up in more vegetarian friendly products.

This helps us understand why claims on what is objectively good or objectively bad can become problematic. We cannot easily determine good and bad unless we have some sort of preferred outcome to measure against, e.g., if individual liberty is of high value in society, then any actions that infringe on individual rights and use coercion will be labeled as bad. Subjective value theory is critical in understanding cultural and economic issues because it is the subjective preferences of a community that will determine specific outcomes.

Since its settlement, Utah's population has overwhelmingly been made up of religious people, mostly Mormons. The most central tenet of the Mormon faith is family⁴. It is only logical then that communities in Utah would structure their economic system around families. An expected outcome in such a culture would be high levels of childbirth — seeing that pregnancy is exclusive to women, we can most certainly expect to see unequal levels of workforce participation and labor productivity between men and women. Where incomes are determined by labor productivity, we can also anticipate that men will tend to have higher levels of income since mothers suffer a gap in their years of experience and tend to have more unpaid hours of labor (e.g., being a mom) than men. Note that we are not saying the value of women is based on their ability to be mothers but rather analyzing the unequal affect that motherhood and childbirth have on women compared to men in the business world, where wages are paid. Nor does income represent the inherent value of a person, but rather it tends to indicate the value of one's labor in economic exchange.

During the last quarter of 2021, the Utah Women & Leadership Project published two papers: *Utah Gender Wage Gap: A 2021 Update* (Winkel, et al 2021) and *Women's Equality in Utah: Why Utah Is Ranked as the Worst State, and What Can Be Done* (Madsen & Madsen 2021). These papers refer to studies and data reported by WalletHub, the Salt Lake Tribune in collaboration with Suffolk University, and the UWLP's own recalculation on WalletHub's study.

In the paper by Winkel, the "Research Snapshot" focuses on the gender pay gap exclusively. This paper refers to data gathered by the SLC Tribune and Suffolk University which surveyed 400 women in Utah⁵. In reviewing the questions found on the survey, there were several that stuck out as questionable regarding their reliability in determining sexism as the culprit behind gender disparity. For example, the question, "Generally, do you feel Utah is headed in the right direction or is on the wrong track?" doesn't specify what is "the right direction" or the "wrong track". Lacking this context, it is hard to understand what exactly is meant when 63% vote "right direction". Other questions seemed to be contradictory in that when thinking about all of female Utahns, women said they believed they were to some degree at a lower status than men or that their biggest challenge was "cultural expectations

about gender roles”; however, when asked about their own personal experiences, over 70% of women said that they felt that their support networks (family, friends, faith, etc.) were strongly supportive of their aspirations for their careers and higher educational goals. Additionally, over 70% said they felt they were reaching or had attained their educational goals.

It is more important to take into consideration the personal experiences of these women versus their perceptions of what they think others are going through — and in this case it doesn’t seem accurate to say that the larger perception held by these women matches up with their collective personal experiences. When it comes to working hours, only 183 identified as having worked part-time in the past 10 years and the highest scores explaining why were between being at home with family or to make additional income.

Furthermore, 50% of those 183 said they *did not prefer* working full-time. Full-time versus part-time is one of the key factors behind the disparity between men and women. Accusations of sexism are completely baseless when women are voluntarily choosing to work less than men.

When you split the survey between actual personal preference along with experience against perceptions of the larger group and things they would like to see, the results tell different stories. Despite the belief that women as a whole in Utah experience lower status and discrimination, they themselves report having received strong support from their networks for their decisions. Of those who were working part-time, half said they preferred part-time to full-time. As Dr. Thomas Sowell has pointed out all through his career, statistical disparities without knowledge behind the data mean nothing; therefore, any conclusions relying solely on disparate outcomes are meaningless.

Winkel and her colleagues make several important concessions in their research regarding some of the most important factors behind the pay gap: “The gender wage gap decreases when controlling for factors such as age, education, and job selection, yet recent studies have shown a remaining 2% to 8% gender wage gap.” (p.1) What makes this extremely significant is that the paper opens by saying that Utah women earn 30% less than men. After controlling for said variables, the gap shrinks anywhere from 73% to 93%. In other words, the UWLP’s own research shows that women’s age and personal choices regarding work alone almost completely close the wage gap. Assuming that the remaining 2% to 8% can be explained conclusively as sexism, that would mean it’s role only plays from 7% to 27%⁶ of the total gap. However, the reality is that there still exist other factors that are hard to measure that could explain the remaining gap. For example, one of the most well-known personality differences between men and women in the workplace is that women tend to be more agreeable, a trait that typically leads to lower wages.

Highlighting the economic factors at play is important in dissecting whether disparate outcomes are consequences of gender discrimination or personal decisions. What we can see thus far is that the reality aligns more with the latter. However, the UWLP is aware of this. Consequently, they then shift the blame from what most people would interpret as sexism to the fault of sexist cultural and social norms. This argument thus moves away from the standard thought that women are excluded from higher incomes or leadership roles because they are women, and towards the idea that women have “internalized”⁷ sexist attitudes against themselves. This is a bizarre claim to say the least. How would one measure the level of internalized sexism? Researchers would have to prove that, despite a woman’s personal preference to become a mother or work fewer hours, she is not choosing to do so because of her own autonomy, but rather because she was brainwashed into doing so via culture.⁸ Other metrics that could prove useful might look at data from women who regret having had children as well as women who are sad because they never became mothers.

3. Metrics Showing Statistical Inequalities Do Not Necessitate Sexism

The most recent report published by the UWLP (Madsen & Madsen 2021) was a white paper commissioned by Zion's Bank released at the beginning of December 2021. Using WalletHub's data, the authors of this study recalculated the 17 metrics that WalletHub used "to ascertain where women receive the most equal treatment". (p.1, 4) One of the sources of data that is referenced comes from a national questionnaire put out by "economists from the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and National University of Singapore" (p.1) in which participants were asked questions to measure sexist attitudes. As demonstrated in earlier sections of the present paper, questionnaires like these can be tricky, biased, or even interpreted in a myriad of ways. Despite attempts to find the questionnaire published by these universities, only references to the study came up — not the study itself. This makes it difficult to know what questions were asked and how they were measuring them against sexist attitudes. Were answers that upheld more traditional family roles labeled as more sexist? If so, is it then accurate to say that holding a belief in different family responsibilities is sexist? The UWLP paper also reiterates the notion that internalized sexism is a major factor in Utah's gender disparities. (p. 1)

Before going into its findings, the white paper makes several important concessions that don't appear to receive as much credit as they are due. For example, it is acknowledged that the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints make up 60% of the population and therefore outcomes will be heavily influenced by this fact,

The Latter-day Saint Church emphasizes family formation, and, while recognizing equality between partners in marriage, it also emphasizes that genders have different roles—men and fathers to provide and protect, and women and mothers to nurture and teach their children. This division of effort and focus continues to influence the labor force decisions of many Utah residents and most likely impacts how Utah scores on several of the metrics measured in the WalletHub survey... (p. 3)

Holding the belief that there exist gender roles or responsibilities within a family does not necessitate the existence of sexism or the belief that one gender is above the other. In fact, it isn't doctrine within the church that men must always and only be the providers and women the caregivers. Plenty of non-traditional families can be found within the faith and are not excluded or punished for mothers taking on the responsibility of provider and fathers of caregiver. The Church's encouragement of gender roles can easily be described as the division of labor — a central law of economics that describes the importance of human cooperation in society to bring about greater productivity.

The UWLP also points out that the WalletHub ranking system "may not include other potential equality metrics that could shed a more positive light on Utah women's contributions in various domains, including the home and community." (p. 3) Leaving out important statistics that would serve to defend Utah's status as an "equal" state for women is biased when the ultimate conclusions given by these reports are that Utah is the worst in this regard. Moreover, it is also conceded that in another report by WalletHub from the same year, "The Best and Worst States for Women" (McCann, 2021b) the Beehive state ranks significantly higher: "Utah ranks much better—28th. This ranking includes women's economic and social wellbeing (Utah=32) and women's health and safety (Utah=24)." (Madsen & Madsen, p. 3, 2021).

In fact, according to the women's equality survey, Nevada is ranked number one and Utah is dead last, while in the survey highlighting the best states for women, Utah not only jumps up to number 28, Nevada drops to the 44th spot out of 50. The question then arises: why is the state that is alleged to

be the most equal one of the worst for women generally hopping around so radically? And how would Utah, ranking the worst for “equality”, rank significantly higher for women generally? What is the relationship between “equality” as defined by the UWLP and the best place to live altogether for women?

It is also worth highlighting that another severely overlooked weakness to the WalletHub survey is that “The report’s author explained that for certain metrics—where women showed an advantage over men—they treated the state as having gender equality.” (Madsen & Madsen, p.4 2021). This is another metric that, being discounted, allows for a desired outcome rather than accurate reporting. Again, while these factors are mentioned by the white paper, they are highly disregarded seeing that the report’s conclusion is that Utah is terribly sexist.

In analyzing the 17 key indicators that WalletHub used, we argue, regardless of their statistical outcomes, they do not serve to determine whether Utah has a sexism problem or not. Disparities in indicators like income (#1, #2)⁹, entrepreneurship rate (#6), average working hours (#7), or share of representative seats (#14-17) do not indicate any level of sexism whatsoever. Furthermore, providing recommendations to close these gaps while ignoring the reasons they exist is also inappropriate. For example, a significant portion of the income disparity between men and women can be explained by total working hours in full-time positions. The data shows that women working full-time average about 33.3 hours per week while men average 40.5 hours per week. (Madsen & Madsen, p.10 2021.) The UWLP once again admits that this particular indicator actually disadvantages men instead women and therefore, is discounted by WalletHub. The UWLP then recommends that, to close this gender wage gap,

women need to increase their paid working time per week by 26 minutes. Each hour’s increase in weekly employment beyond that would decrease the discrepancy by almost 2.5% and would increase Utah’s total by 0.63 points... If women are to increase their hours doing paid work, it should be balanced by a complementary increase in the unpaid work performed by men, which would reduce the likelihood of women experiencing overwork and burnout. (p. 10)

The implications of such actions would mean that, for the sake of simply closing the gap, women need to spend more time working, even though a significant portion of them may prefer working less. Additionally, assuming a household with the average incomes of a man and a woman in Utah according to the Madsen & Madsen white paper¹⁰, even though the husband has a higher marginal income, the wife — for the sake of gender equality — should work more paid hours while the husband works more unpaid hours. Never mind that this would decrease the total household income as well as the family budget; the focus here is on statistical parity between genders. To make matters worse, the white paper also advises raising the minimum wage by \$2.00 in order to address the total annual income gap. This flies in the face of basic economics: raising the price floor does not solve issues like poverty or low wages. It simply makes employees more expensive to hire and leads to higher levels of unemployment than there otherwise would have been.¹¹

4. The Marital Asymmetry Hypothesis

Let us contemplate one last statistical consideration, the marital asymmetry hypothesis. Utah has the highest marriage rate of all states in the union.¹² Here are the ten most heavily married states:

Utah	55.80%
Idaho	54.90%
Wyoming	54.30%
Nebraska	52.70%
North Dakota	52.40%
Kansas	52.20%
Montana	52.00%
Iowa	51.90%
New Hampshire	51.80%
Minnesota	51.70%

Here are the least heavily married ones:

California	46.80%
Georgia	46.80%
Mass.	46.60%
Florida	46.50%
Nevada	45.70%
New York	45.20%
Mississippi	45.00%
Rhode Is	44.60%
New Mex	43.90%
Louisiana	43.70%
DC	29.10%

Why should this even be of any relevance to our considerations? That is because marriage, alone, is one of the most powerful explanations of the male female wage gap compared to pretty much all of the other elements, such as full time versus part time, danger of the occupation, needed preparation, schooling, etc. How so? Marriage elevates the husband's compensation and reduces that of the wives'. Why? This is because she does the lion's share of the cooking, cleaning, shopping, child care, chauffeuring, not only for the children, but for her partner as well. She in effect assists him in earning his greater income, while decreasing her own. Why? This is due to specialization and the division of labor, and the doctrine of alternative or opportunity costs: whenever you do anything, you do it at the cost of being able to do other things less well. If you specialize in playing the cello, like Yo Yo Ma, your time in the 100-meter dash will suffer. If you engage in the latter pursuit, like Usain Bolt, you are unlikely, also, to be a world-class cellist. When women focus on child care and household duties, they do so at the cost of reducing their productivity in the business world, and, hence, their salaries. The more marriages in a state, hence, the greater the pay gap.

There are two considerations to take into account in seeing the truth of these contentions. The pay gap between never married men and women, those not widowed, divorced, separated, or in any way connected to marriage, is virtually zero. Whereas in the case of the ever marrieds, alone, the gap is far larger than that of all males and females. Second, if men and women really had the same discounted marginal revenue productivity, and yet were paid differently, even slightly, there would be market forces brought to bear to correct any such disequilibrium imbalance. For the employer would earn more profit from hiring females than males. The relative remuneration of the former would rise that of the latter would fall, until in equilibrium, the gap would disappear. Also, under these assumptions, profits would be greater in industries which hired women than men; this cannot long endure, and capital

transfers would be from low to high profit areas of the economy. This, too, would increase female, and reduce male, earnings.

Of course, Utah, the, or one of the most heavily married states, would be expected, then, to have a relatively large gap between male and female incomes. But this is due not to sexism; rather, it is a result of the asymmetrical effects of marriage on male and female pay and thus the larger gap between them.¹³

5. Conclusion

When WalletHub and the Utah Women & Leadership Project published their reports on sexism, they demonstrated that there exist different levels of statistical disparity between men and women; however, they did not prove that sexism or gender discrimination was the culprit behind these inequalities. In fact, plenty of the data provided by these reports showed the opposite of prejudice against women: survey participants said they felt very supported in their educational and occupational decisions/goals; a significant amount also said they prefer working part-time over full-time; and the reports themselves admit that the gender wage gap closes significantly when controlling for other factors that aren't related to sexism. Furthermore, WalletHub's other survey on which states are best for women revealed that Utah is actually not the worst state and ranks significantly higher than Nevada, the state ranked #1 for women's equality. What the data about Utah reveals is that the beehive state is still greatly influenced by faith and family. Because these cultural norms lean more towards traditional gender roles, it is expected that there will be differences in areas like paid working hours or annual incomes between men and women. Nevertheless, this does not prove that sexism is the major factor behind gender inequality in Utah. There is no data showing that women are being held back or discriminated against simply because of their gender and nothing else.

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Notes

1. See (Raymond, 2021), (Pugmire, 2021), (Cortez, 2021).
2. See (Utah State University, 2021).
3. African-American men made up an average of 75.6% of the NBA demographic between 2010-2020 according to Statista, 2021.
4. See (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2021).
5. See (Suffolk University, 2019).
6. $2/30 = .066$; $8/30 = .266$
7. See (Madsen, 2021), (Alberty & Ingraham, 2018).
8. Additionally, the fact that social media and the internet have dramatically increased the individual's ability to see outside their own culture makes it harder to believe that this is really the case.
9. These are references to the cardinal order of the 17 key indicators.
10. Women annually earn an average of \$39,784 while men earn \$57,117.
11. See on this (Batemarco, et. al. 2014), (Becker, 1995), (Block, 2001), (Burkhauser, Couch, Wittenburg, 1996), (Cappelli and Block, 2012), (Deere, Murphy and Welch, 1995), (Friedman, undated), (Galloway and Adie, 1995), (Galles, 2014), (Gitis, 2014), (Hamermesh and Welch, 1995), (Hanke, 2014A, 2014B), (Hazlitt, 1946), (Hovenga, Naik and Block, 2013), (Howland, 2013), (Klein and Dompe, 2007), (Leef, 2021), (Lingenfelter et. al., 2017), (McCormick and Block, 2000), (Mincer, 1976), (Neumark, 2015), (Neumark and Wascher, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2000), (North, 2014), (Powell, 2013), (Reisman, 2014), (Rothbard, 1988), (Rustici, 1985), (Sowell, 1995), (Williams, 1982).
12. See (World Population Review, 2023). According to the National Vital Statistics System (2022) Utah takes second place to Montana in his regard.
13. (Becker, 1971, 1983, 1993), (Block, 2014), (Block and Walker, 1985), (Block and Williams, 1981), (Dubner, 2016), (Hoff-Summers, 2017), (Lehmann, 2018), (Levin, 1987), (Lukas, 2011), (Marcus, 2020), (McGee, 2017), (Mincer and Polachek, 1974), (Mortell, 2022), (Perry, 2014), (Sandel and Loury, 2020), (Sowell, 1982), (Woods, 2017). For an alternative view, see (Sayers, 2012).