

Gender wage gap bills have stalled in the Utah Legislature. What can the private sector do?

Women in the Beehive State earn about 30% less than their male coworkers, a statistic that has remained consistent over the years.



(Squire) A handful of female employees at Squire, a Utah-based accounting firm, working in their preferred environment. Squire has been making an effort to address the gender wage gap at their firm. In Utah, women make about 30% less



By Saige Miller and Becky Jacobs | Dec. 14, 2021, 8:00 a.m. | Updated: Dec. 16, 2021, 4:21 p.m.

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For decades, Utah has had [one of the largest gender wage gaps](#) in the nation — and it hasn't budged in the last few years. The disparity also hasn't inspired much action by state lawmakers, a review by The Salt Lake Tribune found.

"It's been hard to pass these kinds of legislation in our Legislature," said Democratic state Sen. Jani Iwamoto. Still, she feels it's important to address the gender wage gap in Utah.

"I've experienced this myself," said Iwamoto, recounting the time when she was a practicing lawyer in San Francisco.

Overall, women in the Beehive State still make about 30% less than their male coworkers, according to [a recent report](#) from the Utah Women and Leadership Project at Utah State University.

"It's definitely disappointing to know that it hasn't gotten much better," said Rebecca Winkle, the lead researcher on the report.

In order to work towards solving the gap, Utahns need to move away from thinking about it as "a working women's issue," according to Winkle, who works in the oil and petroleum industry.



help those friends and family and community advocacy groups see the consequences that the wage gap has,” said Winkle. “Let’s identify the economic burden it creates for the state, as this is disproportionately hurting lower-income women and single, working mothers and female heads of household.”

Women in Utah want their government and business leaders to take action to close the gender wage gap, according to [a statewide poll](#) conducted by The Salt Lake Tribune in 2019. And there are specific steps leaders in the public and the private sectors can take to shrink Utah’s gender pay gap.

A look at the laws

Prior to becoming a lawmaker, Iwamoto worked in San Francisco as a lawyer in the 1980s, when she discovered a male lawyer new to the firm was making substantially more money than her.

“I found this out. And I told my boss that I work night and day. He [the new male lawyer] goes home at 5. I passed the bar [exam]. He hasn’t passed the bar,” recalled Iwamoto.

Her boss said the new lawyer made more money because he was supporting a family. Iwamoto was single at the time and was ready to leave her big law firm job over the wage discrepancy.

“I explained to him that if that was your daughter doing the same work or more, would you be OK with this?” Iwamoto said. Iwamoto’s boss acknowledged and apologized for the disparity. She was granted a roughly \$40,000 raise.



Iwamoto carries that experience with her into the Utah Senate chambers. The lawmaker has been successful in passing one piece of legislation pertaining to the gender wage gap, where most bills on the topic tend to die upon arrival.

The Salt Lake Tribune examined bills from 2015 through the 2021 legislative session and found seven that specifically related to the gender wage gap. Of those, one was passed and signed into law. That bill, [SB185](#), sponsored by Iwamoto, helped Utahns pursue compensation discrimination cases in state court, rather than having to go through federal court, which tends to be more expensive.

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

Three of the bills that failed proposed studies of the gender wage gap in the state. Another would have kept employers from retaliating against employees who discussed their pay. And the other two bills would have had Utah join other states in banning employers from asking an applicant how much they were paid at previous jobs.

Salary history bans are one step that [experts suggest to close the gender wage gap](#) because it can help prevent women from continually receiving low pay. When Utah legislators discussed this issue during the 2019 session, they agreed that women should be paid equally, but some questioned whether it's the government's role to interfere with business.

Republican Rep. Kera Birkeland, who was not serving in 2019 when these conversations were taking place, recognizes more can be done to address Utah's above-average wage gap. Utah "could do a lot better job" when it comes to the inequity, she said. However, Birkeland isn't fully convinced the public should fork over money for the cause.

"I don't know that we'd want to allocate taxpayer funding, though, to understand this



Rather, some legislators on Utah's Capitol Hill argued in 2019 that women can negotiate for themselves or refuse to answer questions about their salary history. But Mickell Jimenez, a labor and employment law attorney at Holland & Hart, told The Tribune, "That's not practical."

"You don't ask an employee to come in, when they're trying to ... make a good impression because they want to get a job, to self-select whether or not they're going to say to ... their potential employer, 'No, I don't want to answer that question,'" she said.

A bird's eye business view

[Jonyce Bullock](#), CEO of Squire, a Utah-based accounting firm, is more than aware of the abundant male representation in the accounting industry.

"Only around 20% of partner positions, leadership positions in CPA [certified public accountant] firms are filled by women," said Bullock, "probably less than 5% in Utah."

Bullock was the first female partner Squire ever had. Currently, three out of 24 partner positions are held by women. Squire has 185 employees and approximately 50% are female, according to Bullock.

For the last decade, Squire has been investigating and working to close the gender pay gap within the company.

"We're accountants, so we like to measure everything. We like to make everything a mathematical formula," said Bullock. "And so from that perspective, we shouldn't really have a gender pay gap. ... Everybody has equal access to the input and the output."



To help create equal access, Bullock's company has implemented what each accountant's "multiple" should be based on their title at Squire.

A "multiple" is a mathematical formula that says the salary must fit within a range based on the employee's position and total hours worked each year. Squire's human resources department also monitors every employee's multiple to see if there's any bias.

Bullock explained it like this: If you're a new accountant, the multiple should fall between ranges A and B. Similarly, if you're a senior accountant, the multiple should be between ranges C and D.

"So, if all the professionals are within specific multiple ranges, in theory, I shouldn't have a pay gap," said Bullock, emphasizing that Squire monitors the multiple ranges of each working professional.

From a mathematical standpoint, that makes sense, said Bullock. But it doesn't take into account the various billing rates accountants set.

"I do know that a female and male have the same multiple, so there's not a gap there," said Bullock. "But that might mean that she has a lower billing rate and a lower pay, and he has a higher billing rate and a higher pay, and it works out to be the same multiple."

(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Jonyce Bullock, CEO of Squire, a Utah-based accounting firm, pictured in October 2020, has worked on addressing the gender wage gap among her employees.

Bullock began to notice the math equation wasn't solving the gender pay gap alone



Bullock.

Since Squire began looking at the different billing rates every accountant charges, Bullock noticed the female accountants tend to charge less on average.

Bullock provided the example of when a male employee approached management and asked to raise his billing rate by 10%. They gave him the raise. However, when Squire approached every employee about a raise, two women rejected the raise because they didn't want to increase their billing rate.

And that's not an isolated incident. Bullock noted women seem to be more reluctant to bump their rates than their male coworkers.

"These women are just like, 'I get paid enough. I'm comfortable with the going rate and I don't want to make myself uncomfortable and have to explain to my clients what I'm going to charge more so I can get paid more,'" said Bullock.

But Squire wants to break that mindset, said Bullock, and is taking steps to do so.

Bullock is working with supervisors across the company to encourage female accountants to feel comfortable charging more money per hour because their work is worth it.

"I'm asking them [the supervisors] to meet with them [employees], and see what we can do to help support them in feeling comfortable with their billing rate because they do have input into their billing," said Bullock.

Moving the needle forward

Mickell Jimenez, a labor and employment attorney in Utah, said she doesn't think most



“I think the problem is all this implicit bias and the ... unintentional consequences that come out from trying to put something in place that you think is going to be neutral in application, but then actually ... it’s not,” she said.

To try to change that, companies can focus on education and awareness in the workplace, such as through diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, with “top-down buy-in from the executives,” Jimenez said, who have “the power and the influence” to change their own business and to talk with legislators and their communities.

“That’s not something that’s going to happen overnight,” she said, “but I think we have to be willing to invest in the long game to have permanent changes in that way.”

Even smaller businesses can work on this by bringing in consultants to help them, Jimenez said. And it makes “good business sense” to look at the pay gap and create an inclusive workplace as companies struggle to hire and retain employees right now.

“It is hard to keep employees if you’re not willing to get on that bandwagon,” she said.

Researcher Rebecca Winkle is confident bigger strides can be made to close the gender wage gap in Utah and strengthen women’s participation in the workforce, especially in male-dominated professions.

“Occupational segregation impacts the gender wage gap,” said Winkle, referencing a report that found [only 4% of women](#) had applied to work in the oil and gas industry. As of 2015, women made up 19% of the combined oil & gas and petrochemical industries, according to the [American Petroleum Institute](#).

Winkle pointed to things such as [flexible work models](#), increasing pay transparency, re-



“One of the things that’s great about Utah is that it’s known for its innovative entrepreneurial spirit,” said Winkle, “and that’s something that should serve us really well for an issue like the gender wage gap.”

Becky Jacobs is a [Report for America](#) corps member and writes about the status of women in Utah for The Salt Lake Tribune. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep her writing stories like this one; please consider making a tax-deductible gift of any amount today by clicking [here](#).



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