

Statement

**Parallel event “Student Engaged Learning to empower mountain women and girls”
63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women
Hailee Hodgson, member, Utah International Mountain Forum,
a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University**

Good morning, all. My name is Hailee Hodgson and I am a descendant of 19th century Mormon women who settled Utah and worked, as my colleague Hannah has described, to create a sustainable economy for their future generations. Before settling in Utah, these women formed the Relief Society to assist the poor and needy in and out of the faith. Under its all-female leadership, the Relief Society would expand into providing educational, vocational, and leadership training for women and girls, especially to address issues related to settling the mountains and deserts of Utah. The organization still exists as one of the largest and oldest women’s organizations in the world. This March, UVU highlighted past and present Mormon women at the conference “Women of Mormondom: Contemporary Issues & Perspectives,” which brought together female faculty, authors, and scholars from around the world to discuss the role of Utah’s Mormon women, and addressed current religious, economic, and social issues facing Utah women.

The examples of Mormon women inspired me to study the issues facing modern Utah women and girls. Under UVU’s engaged learning model, I researched Utah women in the workforce. Compared with the US generally, Utah women have higher initial workforce participation rates, but those rates drop below national averages after women reach age 25, about the same time women started their families. I found that Utah’s gender wage gap is one of the highest in the nation, Utah women are much more likely to work minimum wage jobs, and they have lower levels of educational achievement. To add to these challenges, finding and affording quality child care, in order for mothers to work, is among the most pressing barriers.

In 2016 UVU conducted a study, “Poverty Among Utah Women” and found that in Utah’s rural mountain counties, these issues are compounded by even lower access to services, and currently lead the state in the highest poverty and unemployment rates, and they have the lowest incomes and produce the least college graduates. UIMF is also concerned with these issues, and UIMF member Ms. Lacey Meyer is planning under student engaged learning to host a roundtable discussion with local leaders about the importance of rural Utah, titled “Sustainable Development in Utah.”

According to the 2017 study “The Status of Women in Utah: Economic Choices and Challenges” made by female researchers affiliated with the Utah-based Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and Women in the Economy Commission, women often cite the lack of government action as reasons for leading issues. In 2018, Utah’s Office of Rural Development began implementing programs designed to boost rural business growth and employment, and Utah’s state government has recently passed bills incentivizing companies to outsource developments to rural areas. However, much must still be done, efforts towards creating opportunities for women in the workforce would jumpstart the growth that Utah needs.

Combined with my personal involvement with the Relief Society and my research with my studies in national security, I have been inspired to work in my community on issues related to women in order to empower myself and the women around me. I look forward to working in the future with my UIMF colleagues under UVU's student engaged learning model to better understand and address these important issues related to Utah's urban/rural divide. Thank you.