

**Research on the Role of Women in Montana & the Workplace:  
2016-2019**



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## Executive Summary

From 2016-2019, the Women's Foundation of Montana (WFM) collaborated with researchers from the University of Montana to examine the broader experiences of women in Montana's workforce. We conducted three mixed-methods studies since 2016: *WFM Examining Best Practices* (2016), *Women, Perceptions, and Montana's 56 Counties* (2017) and *Lessons Learned: Women, Montana, and Perspectives about the Workplace* (2018). Collectively, respondents across each research project expressed concerns regarding variation in workplace policy, discrimination, and the desire for more flexibility. Listed below are highlights from each research report.

### *WFM Examining Best Practices (2016):*

- Methodology: exploratory online survey to examine the role of women in Montana businesses.
- Thirty-four survey respondents provided baseline information about common practices of large<sup>1</sup> employers in the state of Montana with regard to benefits, practices, and policies from the perspective of women in leadership roles.

### *Women, Perceptions, and Montana's 56 Counties (2017)*

- Methodology: online survey to examine the role of women in county level government in Montana.
- One hundred and sixty respondents demonstrated the prevalence of a pay gap between men in women in county level government.

### *Lessons Learned: Women, Montana, and Perspectives about the Workplace (2018)*

- Methodology: five focus groups in Missoula, Great Falls, Billings, Bozeman and Kalispell, Montana to investigate the role of women in a variety of workplace settings (e.g. self-employed, government, nonprofit, business).
- Forty-four participants across the focus groups expressed concerns regarding work-life balance and lack of support from employers.

The following provides data themes across each of the research projects to date. This research offer insights into perspectives of women in the workplace across Montana and plausible policy recommendations for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Over 100 employees.

### Research to Date

To date, extensive research has been conducted to study women in the workplace across the United States. Yet, there is a lack of research that focuses on women in Montana. We first begin our report with an overview that identifies research to date about the role women play in the workforce more broadly, which served as the foundation for our statewide Montana research.

Scholars have extensively studied the role of women within the workplace. Matos, Galinsky and Bond's (2016) report flexibility for women in the workplace is impacted by their day-to-day job performance. Put simply, women are more successful at work when flexibility is available (e.g. break times, time off for family and personal needs). Bridges and Owens (2016) build upon this research to examine job satisfaction and general wellbeing of women in the workplace. This research finds that women who lack flexibility are the least optimistic about their career prospects. Women who have flexibility at work have yielded higher rates for career advancement.

By way of comparison, Glass and Estes (1997) explain the modern work environment has become much more receptive to the needs of working mothers, with an increase in the amounts of formalized work/family programs (e.g. child-care services, flexible spending accounts work hour reduction). Despite this positive historical trend, there are still major shortfalls. Glass and Estes explain that, nationwide, the prevalence of family-friendly policies are strongly associated with firm size. Unsurprisingly, the smaller the firm, the less likely they are to have strong, formal family-friendly policies, especially when it comes to the provision of childcare assistance and maternity leave coverage. The authors cite a 1995 experiment (Glass and Fujimoto) that sampled employed women and found that firm size was positively related only to formal benefits, however, whereas more informal leave and schedule policies (dependent primarily on supervisor cooperation) were more prevalent in smaller firms.

According to the Department of Labor, twelve percent of businesses nationwide provide paid family leave to their employees (U.S. Department of Labor). Montana falls below the national average, with only six percent of businesses providing paid leave as of 2013 (Wagner, 2015). Women in Montana's workforce also face greater pay disparity than the national average (Equal Pay for Equal Work Montana Task Force, 2018).

This brief review of the literature provides a lens into the life of women in the contemporary workplace. It is clear that best practices for women in Montana's workforce requires a closer examination. Here, we use the aforementioned research as the building blocks for our collective research to address the role women play in Montana's workforce.

## Key Findings

The following delves deeper into each of our three research projects.

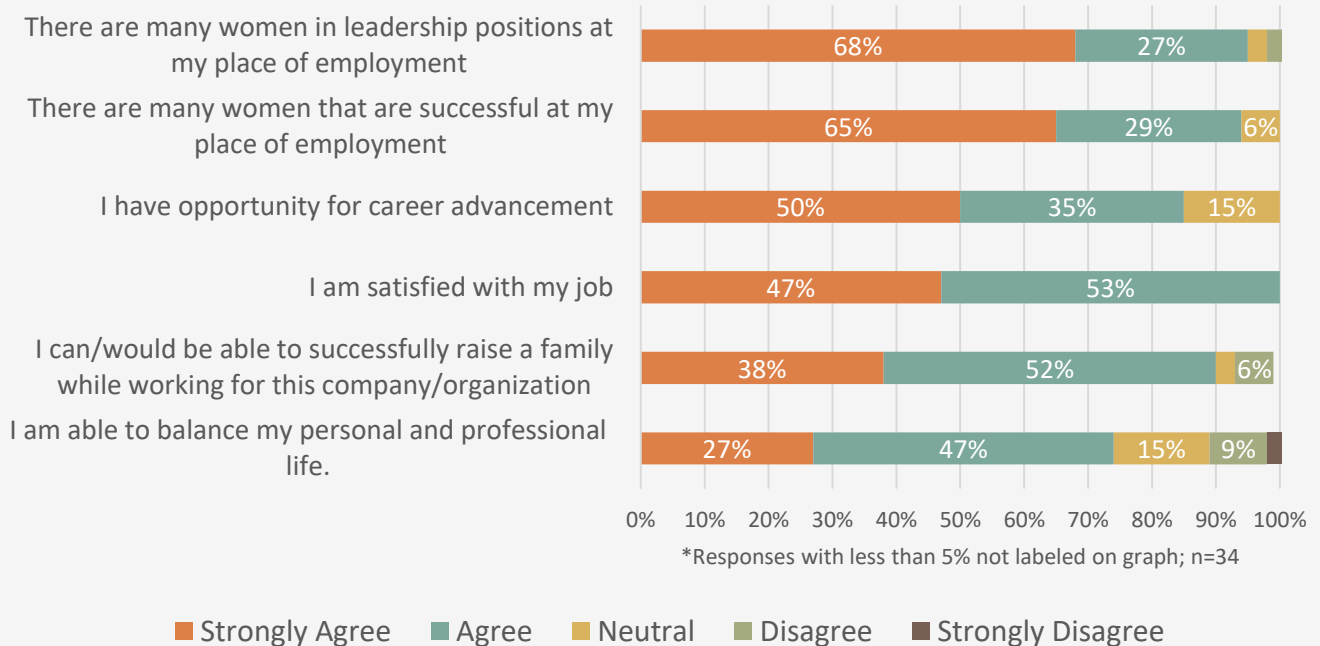
### Women’s Foundation of Montana Examining Best Practices

Spring 2016, Dr. Sara Rinfret and two political science graduate students Megan Harbaugh and Dani Howlett conducted a study to investigate common practices among the 50 largest employers in the state of Montana. An online survey was created utilizing the University of Montana’s Qualtrics survey software to better understand benefits, practices, and policies used by companies in Montana from the perspective of women in leadership roles. The graduate student researchers compiled a list of women in Montana’s largest businesses and contacted them to complete a brief online survey. The survey link was sent to 44 women in leadership roles across these companies, receiving a 77percent response rate (n=34).

Key findings from this study included<sup>2</sup>:

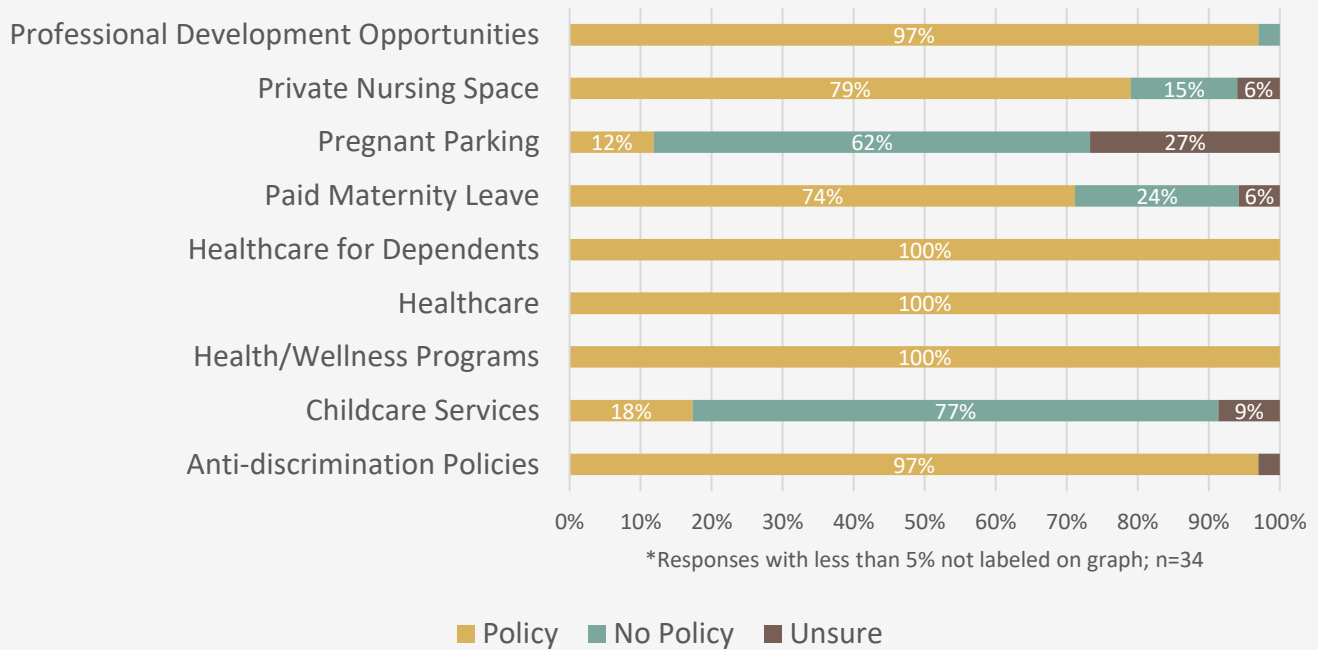
- Montana women in leadership positions have somewhat positive opinions about their own careers and opportunity for advancement (see Figure 1);
- Montana employers use a variety of workplace policies within their businesses that are favorable for women, but reported improvement is necessary(see Figure 2); and
- Discrimination occurs in the workplace, although it might not be recognized (Howlett & Harbaugh, 2016).

**Figure 1: Work Satisfaction and Opportunity**



<sup>2</sup> Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

**Figure 2: Policies and Practices**



*Women, Perceptions, and Montana’s 56 Counties*

Fall 2017, Dr. Sara Rinfret and Master of Public Administration graduate student Gina Tracy created an online survey using the University of Montana’s Qualtrics survey software. The focus of this survey was to evaluate the role of gender and workplace policies in county-level positions across Montana. Utilizing the 2017 Directory of Montana County Officials handbook, the researchers developed an email list which included individuals from each of the 56 counties statewide. The 10 minute survey and was sent to 554 Montana officials. A total of 160 individuals responded, for a response rate of 29 percent (n=160)<sup>3</sup>. From the responses, women responded at a high rate, 65 percent of the total (n=104).

Key findings from the survey include:

- A pay gap exists between men and women in various county-level positions in Montana (see Table 1);

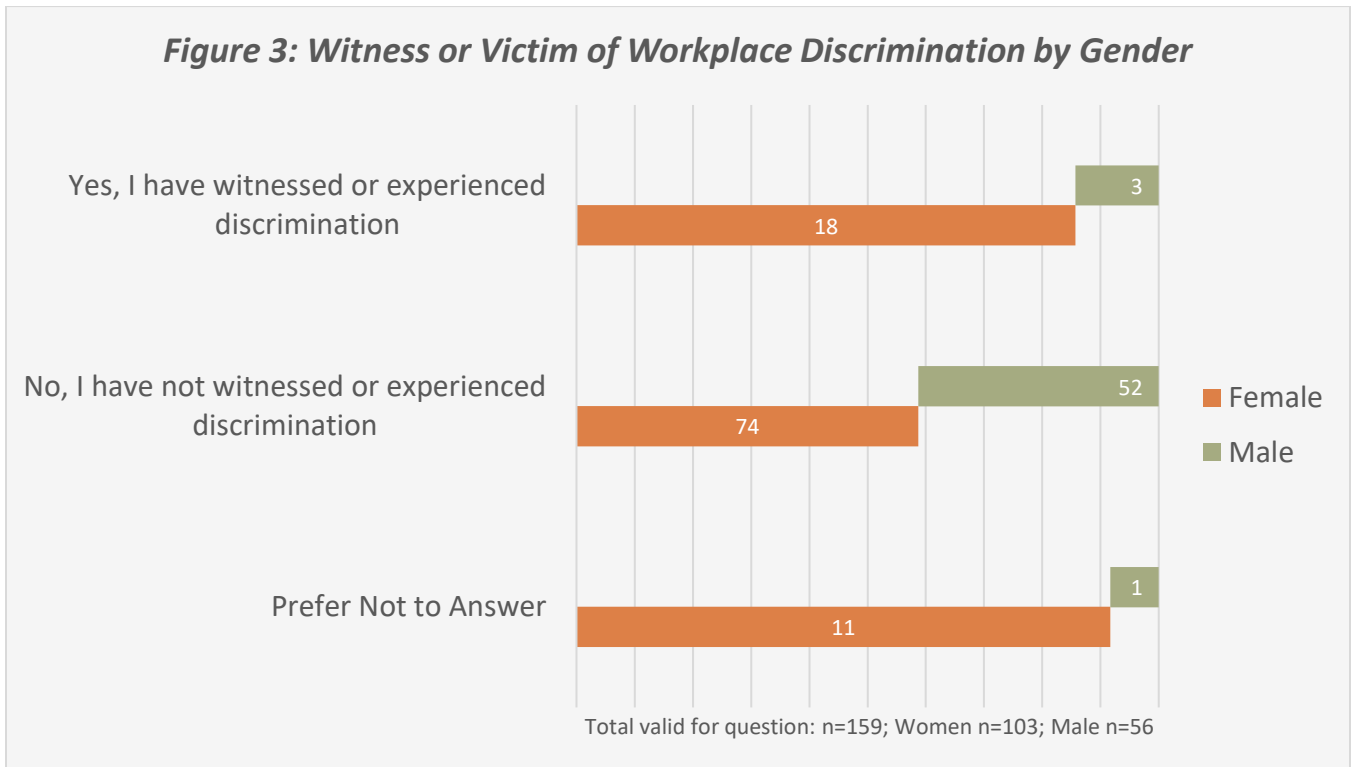
<sup>3</sup> The response rate of 29% is lower than we expected; however, November was an election year for some positions, and respondents indicated this concern as they were leaving their current position or occupying a new position. In addition, several respondents were out of the office during the two email cycles, and we received automated replies explaining their leave of absence. Response rates also reflect barriers from incorrect email address and the shift in positions from the current election. Finally, response rates had a higher percentage of female participants (65 percent) versus male (35 percent).

- Variance exists between male and female experiences with workplace discrimination (see Figure 3); and
- Flexibility in the workplace (e.g. working from home, time off for adoption, maternity/paternity policy) varies across Montana county-level employees (Figure 4) (Tracy, 2017).

**Table 1: Montana Official Salaries per Position**

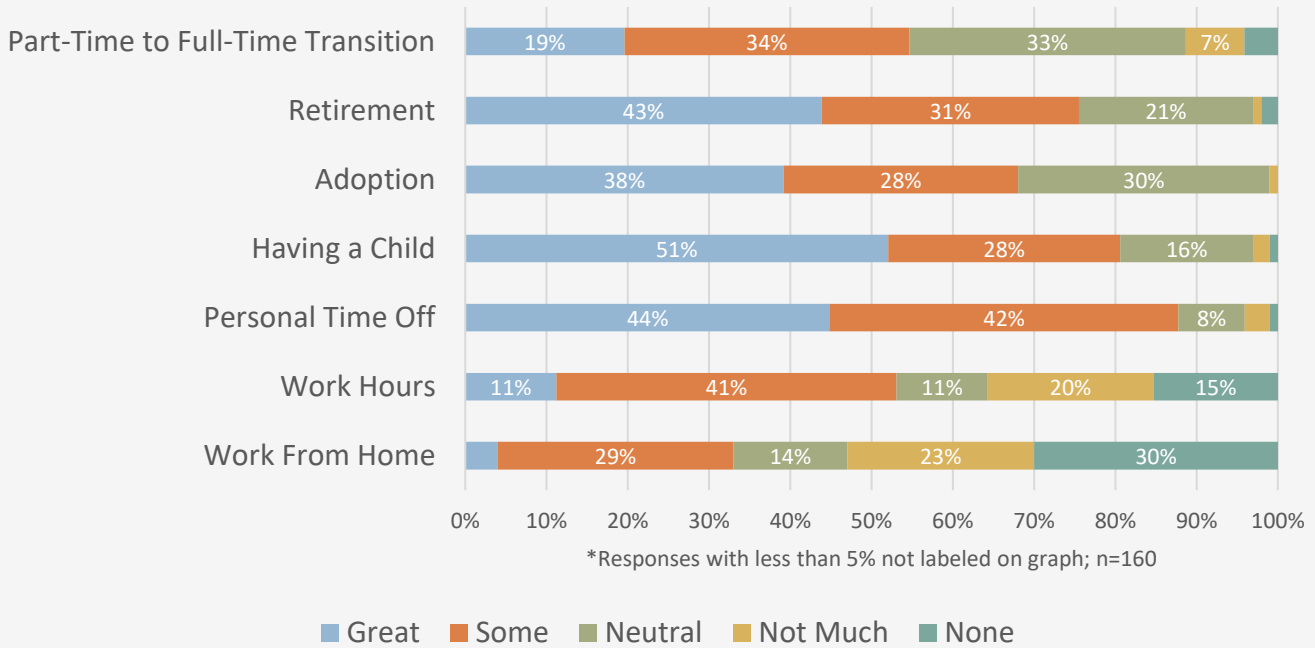
	Dominant Gender <sup>4</sup>	Salary
Treasurer	Female	\$35,700
Clerk and Recorder	Female	\$51,000
Superintendent	Female	\$106,500
Commissioner	Male	\$54,500
County Attorney	Male	\$110,000

**Figure 3: Witness or Victim of Workplace Discrimination by Gender**



<sup>4</sup> Dominant gender refers to the gender of the majority of employees in each position

**Figure 4: Workplace Flexibility**



*Lessons Learned: Women, Montana, and Perspectives about the Workplace*

Fall 2018, Dr. Sara Rinfret, Master of Public Administration graduate student Emily Copeland and undergraduate political science student Daisy Ward, conducted focus groups throughout the state of Montana to understand the role of women in Montana workplaces. Five focus groups were conducted in Billings, Bozeman, Great Falls, Kalispell, and Missoula, Montana with a total of 44 women participating. Participants were employed in a variety of roles and sectors and were asked to discuss their experiences related to policies, leadership, discrimination, and satisfaction in the workplace.

Key findings from this research included:

- Job satisfaction varies by workplace and supervisor;
- Self-employment has become an alternative for women seeking a higher level of job satisfaction;
- Work/life balance is a major driving factor for Montana women across occupations; and
- Experiences of discrimination are pervasive across age, location and employers (Copeland & Ward, 2018).



### Key Themes Across All Studies

Our inductive analysis of research from 2016-2019 illustrates four broader themes.

1. *Inconsistent workplace policies and practices*: Workplace policies are inconsistent throughout the state. The focus group data strongly suggested workplace policies are inconsistent because of a supervisor's interpretation or lack of implementation. For example, one woman stated her place of employment provided paid maternity leave. However, her supervisor questioned this availability under the Family Medical Leave Act. In many cases, the ways in which women are treated when trying to take maternity leave are illegal, but a lack of education surrounding the topic meant that neither they, nor their employers knew their rights.
2. *Rate of Pay*: Our collective research demonstrate lower rates of pay for female employees. This issue is compounded by the overall low rates of compensation in the state of Montana.
3. *Defining Flexibility*: Throughout our research, women emphasized the high value they place on flexibility (e.g. working from home, flexible hours) for their organizations. The goal would be to create a space where everyone, not just women, would be eligible to increase job satisfaction.
4. *Workplace Discrimination*: Experiences of discrimination in the workplace continue to occur. Many workplaces have policies in place which define discrimination and the process for addressing incidents. However, some women reported not being aware of these policies in their workplace. More notably, women do not report acts of discrimination due to fear of retaliation.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The three studies documented in this report reveal important quantitative and qualitative data insights about women's experiences in the workplace across Montana. As noted above, consistent themes were apparent. To promote the role of women in the workplace, we recommend the following:

- *Montana Legislative Action:* Montana currently has an Equal Pay Law, but equal pay has not been realized and more work is necessary. To assist in this endeavor, we recommend the Montana legislature should pass a Paycheck Fairness Act. In addition, we recommend the passage of legislation which establishes paid family and medical leave through employer and employee contributions. Additional research shows paid family leave is associated with better job performance and retention among skilled workers, increased family incomes and increased economic growth—all of which would greatly benefit the state of Montana (Gault et al., 2014).
- *Organizational Policies:* Montana employers must work collectively to provide clear organizational policies and guidelines. These guidelines should invoke a culture that promotes transparency and comfortability for employees to succeed. Women fear reporting acts of discrimination and Montana workplaces should address perceived barriers within the workplace.
- *Workplace Flexibility:* With generational shifts, employers (public and private) should pursue workplace flexibility options (e.g. telecommuting, flexible work hours) for *all* employees. Establishing policies for all employees, not just women, promotes an inclusive workplace environment.

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