The underrepresentation of women in business and civic leadership is not a new story, but associating numbers with this disparity can illuminate the progress made and the challenges that persist. Missouri women made up nearly half of the labor pool in 2020 yet led 43% of the state’s payroll businesses either themselves or with male partners. Solely female-owned firms were an even smaller share (25%) compared to male-owned businesses (57%). Even so, this portion of women-owned businesses was three percentage points greater than the national average (22%). Relative to the population, female leadership in public governance is also less prevalent. In 2021, adult women accounted for 51% of Missouri’s population but only 26% of the state’s legislative body; by 2023 this share had increased to 29%, still smaller than Missouri’s female population.

In 2020, there were nearly 25,000 solely female-owned Missouri businesses that employed 203,000 workers. With an average of eight employees, female-owned firms were smaller in size than male-owned firms which averaged 14 employees. Payroll per employee was lower as well, with solely female-owned firms averaging $38,387 per worker compared to $49,763 in male-owned businesses. While the gender pay gap may influence this average, this nationally-recognized disparity is largely due to the higher concentration of female-owned firms in lower sales sectors, including health care, social assistance and personal care businesses.
Women in Civic Leadership

Nationwide, the number of women in civic leadership positions has climbed steadily over the past 30 years. In 1991, women accounted for 2% of the United States Senate; in 2021, that number was 26%. Similarly, only 6.4% of the U.S. House of Representatives was comprised of women in 1991, compared to 27.3% in 2021. Growth is also seen in state legislatures, rising from 18.3% to 30.8%; governors, 6% to 18%; and the U.S. Cabinet, 17.6% to 48% over the same time. Despite these gains, a disparity in representation remains.

Number of Missouri Women in Civic Leadership Positions, 2022

Locally, Missouri women hold a larger share of civic leadership positions. According to March 2022 data from the Local Government Diversity Dashboard, Missouri women made up 70% of finance and budgeting leadership positions across county and municipal governments, in line with the national average (68%). Women also held 27% of chief appointed official positions, in which they were appointed by the elected governing body and responsible for running the day-to-day operations of the government, trailing the national average (29%). Local governments with smaller populations are more likely to have women leaders. Women occupy 38% of top appointed official positions in communities between 1,000 to 5,000 people, but only a quarter of these positions in communities over 100,000.

Additional Notes and Resources

- America’s SBDC Missouri offers resources to Missouri women to start or grow a business.
- United WE’s Appointments Project and MU Extension developed Show-Me REDI, an educational series for Missouri women interested in serving on a board or commission. Learn more about these efforts on the Show-Me MO Success podcast episodes three and eight.

All Missouri Economy Indicators briefs in this series are available at http://muext.us/MissouriEconomyIndicators

Authors: Alan Spell, Assistant Extension Professor, alan.spell@missouri.edu
Luke Dietterle, Extension Specialist, luke.dietterle@missouri.edu