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The Politics of Belonging: Gender, Family, and Gatekeeping in LDS Religious Education

By Eric Paul Rogers and Iliana Christensen

Introduction

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES how the teachings of leaders, institutional policies, and employment practices related to gender and marriage have shifted within LDS Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (S&I) since 1985. S&I belongs to the Church Educational System (CES)¹ of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or the church) and provides weekday religious education to youth and young adults. Positioned at the intersection of scholarship on gender in the church² and studies of religious institutions more broadly,³ we explore how shifting social, theological, and organizational dynamics have shaped

1. Other CES entities include Brigham Young University (BYU), BYU–Hawaii, BYU–Idaho, Ensign College (formerly known as LDS Business College), and BYU–Pathway Worldwide.

2. See Caroline Kline, *Mormon Women at the Crossroads: Global Narratives and the Power of Connectedness* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2022); Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey, *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005); Heather Sundahl and Katie Ludlow Rich, *Fifty Years of Exponent II* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2025); R. Lucero Jones, “Gender, Religion, and Employment: How LDS Working Women Navigate Familial Conflict Concerning Their Paid Work,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 35, no. 1 (2022): 24–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2022.2143620>.

3. See Landon Schnabel, Cyrus Schleifer, Eman Abdelhadi, and Samuel L. Perry, “The Religious Work Ethic and the Spirit of Patriarchy: Religiosity and the Gender Gap in Working for Its Own Sake, 1977 to 2018,” *Sociological Science* 9 (2022): 81, <https://doi.org/10.15195/v9.a4>; Traci Sitzmann and Elizabeth M. Campbell, “The Hidden Cost of Prayer: Religiosity and the Gender Wage Gap,” *Academy of Management Journal* 64, no. 4 (2021): 1016–48, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2019.1254>; Mary Ellen Konieczny, *The Spirit’s Tether: Family, Work, and Religion Among American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Paul Sullins, “The Stained Glass Ceiling: Career Attainment for Women Clergy,” *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 3 (2000): 243, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712578>.

opportunities and constraints for both women and men in S&I. We argue that within S&I, evolving teachings and policies on gender and marriage have functioned not only as expressions of doctrine but as mechanisms of institutional gatekeeping—defining who may teach, lead, and belong—while recent reforms reveal both the possibilities and limits of change within a system seeking to balance theological continuity with social adaptation.

We draw on original oral history interviews conducted in 2025 with current and former S&I employees,⁴ as well as the teachings of church leaders and a range of institutional and public sources. Taken together, these materials provide a window into how gender and marriage have functioned as formative categories within the policies, practices, and cultures of S&I. While much of the institutional focus has centered on gender roles and marital norms, this study pays particular attention to how single educators—especially women—have navigated marginalization within S&I, revealing how marital status functions as a subtle but potent mechanism of professional and spiritual gatekeeping.

By foregrounding perspectives that are largely absent from S&I's official institutional history,⁵ the study contributes to a fuller understanding of how religious education has been shaped by evolving cultural, doctrinal, and organizational dynamics. These firsthand accounts are explored in greater depth in the third section, where they help illuminate how institutional expectations are lived, negotiated, and sometimes contested by those working within S&I.

While the analysis identifies persistent structural tensions, it also acknowledges the sincere efforts of many leaders, teachers, and administrators to minister with compassion and integrity within existing boundaries. Recent developments—including selective policy reforms and expanded teaching models—suggest an evolving institutional landscape.

The goal of this study is not to undermine S&I's mission, but to strengthen it by attending to the lived experiences of those whose stories have often remained

4. In 2025, over forty oral history interviews were conducted by Eric Rogers as part of a research project focused on current and former employees of S&I. Participants were selected primarily from among end-of-career or recently retired individuals whose long tenure provided broad institutional insight. To protect confidentiality, interviewees are identified using anonymized labels (e.g., Participant A) rather than personal names.

5. See *By Study and Also by Faith: One Hundred Years of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion*, Church Educational System manual, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/by-study-and-also-by-faith>, accessed July 15, 2025. While this institutional history details the administrative growth, curricular development, and global expansion of S&I in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it notably omits any substantive discussion of gender and family as they pertain to employee experience. This institutional silence—often framed as a sign of doctrinal consistency and administrative refinement—reflects a broader tendency to narrate progress in terms of fidelity and efficiency while overlooking the gendered exclusions and cultural tensions that have shaped the experiences of women and other marginalized educators within S&I.

at the margins.⁶ Rather than offering a simple narrative of either progress or resistance, this essay invites a more nuanced understanding of how gender and family shape opportunities, identities, and belonging in religious education.

The article is organized into four sections: (1) a brief overview of doctrinal teachings on gender and family within the LDS church, (2) the evolution of policy and practice within S&I, (3) the lived experiences of S&I employees, and (4) the broader implications of these dynamics for the institutional evolution of the church and contemporary efforts toward inclusion.

Doctrinal Foundations: Eternal Roles and Gender Hierarchies

In the final decades of the twentieth century, LDS leaders articulated a doctrinal framework that upheld traditional gender roles, culminating in the 1995 release of *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*. This document declared that “fathers are to preside” and “mothers ... to nurture,” asserting that “gender is an essential characteristic of ... identity and purpose,” thereby codifying prior prophetic teachings and establishing a theological foundation for institutional policy.⁷ Though officially issued in the 1990s, its core ideas had been shaped over preceding decades as church leaders resisted shifting gender norms in broader American culture.

Responding to the women’s movement and the growing participation of women in the workforce, LDS president Spencer W. Kimball (1973–1985) emphasized the divinely appointed nature of motherhood and domesticity.⁸ He taught that women’s highest calling was in the home, warning against “competing with men in employment.”⁹ His successor, Ezra Taft Benson (1985–1994), reinforced these views in his 1987 sermon “To the Mothers in Zion,” teaching that mothers should not work outside the home unless absolutely necessary, as their divinely appointed

6. The authors write from personal experience within the church and its educational institutions. One author served in S&I for over three decades; the other is a former S&I student, a lifelong member of the church, and a former research intern within the organization. The insights offered here arise not from opposition to the mission of S&I, but from a shared commitment to its continual improvement. This analysis is grounded in respect for the spiritual and educational aims of S&I and a desire to ensure those aims are realized in ways that reflect the diversity and dignity of those who serve and are served.

7. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles, *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, issued September 23, 1995, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world>, accessed July 15, 2025.

8. Spencer W. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 319–21.

9. Kimball, *Teachings*, 318; see also Spencer W. Kimball, “Women’s Liberation and Women’s Rights,” *Ensign*, October 1976, 34–36.

role was to nurture children within the home.¹⁰ Benson explained that husbands bore the responsibility for financial provision, reinforcing a gendered division of labor. While framed as eternal doctrine, these teachings reflected a cultural context in which the church—particularly its public discourse and institutional leadership—was predominantly composed of white and middle-class individuals.¹¹ This demographic framing often overlooks the realities of minority women, who have long participated in the workforce out of economic necessity.¹² The *Proclamation on the Family* did not introduce new doctrine but formalized these long-standing assumptions into normative institutional language.

As gender roles and family structures shifted in Western society, LDS church leaders increasingly emphasized divinely appointed roles for men and women. Unlike first and second wave feminism, which primarily focused on legal equality for women, third wave feminism, which emerged in the mid-1990s, emphasized intersectionality, sexual autonomy, and prompted critiques of traditional family values. As such, despite many aspects of feminist ideals—such as equity and dignity—resonating with gospel principles, the broader movement was often portrayed as doctrinally incompatible, and church leaders spoke against the movement.¹³ As a result, feminist identification within church education has frequently been regarded as suspect. In 1993, Elder Boyd K. Packer warned the All-Church Coordinating Council that “the feminist movement, the gay and lesbian movement, and the so-called scholars or intellectuals” posed spiritual dangers to the church.¹⁴ His denunciation helped institutionalize resistance to feminist and intellectual critique, reinforcing a boundary between church teachings and broader cultural changes within the American context.

In 1996, Elder Richard G. Scott reaffirmed the concept of gender complementarity, stating that husbands and wives must work in harmony, with distinctive

10. Benson, “To the Mothers in Zion”; see also LDS Doctrine and Covenants 83:2 (Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants 82:1b).

11. See Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

12. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

13. See Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave,” *Ms. Magazine* (January/February 1992); and Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

14. Boyd K. Packer, “All-Church Coordinating Council” (address, April 18, 1993), via *Archive.org*, originally delivered at the Coordinating Council, Church Office Building, Salt Lake City, https://archive.org/details/coordinating_council_1993_boyd_k_packer, accessed July 15, 2025.

traits that allow them to “think, act, and rejoice as one.”¹⁵ Feminist scholars argue that such teachings encode structural inequality under the guise of divine design.¹⁶ Complementarianism, they contend, often reserves positions of public authority and spiritual leadership for men, while assigning women to domestic or supportive roles that are frequently regarded as secondary in status and significance.¹⁷ Within church discourse, priesthood authority remained aligned with maleness, and motherhood equated with divine womanhood—constructs that constrain women’s leadership and agency.¹⁸

Beyond theology, these assumptions filtered into broader cultural norms that governed inclusion and value. “There are just a million times in our culture where married people are just treated like they matter more. And they are trusted more,” a female religious educator reflected.¹⁹ Her comment captures how marital status operated as a heuristic for righteousness and capacity—an unwritten standard that marginalized those outside traditional family arrangements. The emphasis on marriage as both a spiritual and institutional credential reinforced internal hierarchies, shaping not only who taught and led but also how trust and legitimacy were distributed.

LDS presidents Gordon B. Hinckley (1995–2008), Thomas S. Monson (2008–2018), and Russell M. Nelson (2018–2025) each reaffirmed these doctrines. Hinckley linked salvation and societal stability to adherence to traditional family roles.²⁰ Monson continued this emphasis, consistently citing the *Proclamation* and reinforcing the father-as-priesthood-leader and mother-as-nurturer paradigm.²¹ Nelson has further asserted that “biological sex is an essential characteristic of premortal, mortal, and eternal identity” and emphasized the immutability of divine law amidst cultural shifts.²²

15. Richard G. Scott, “The Joy of Living the Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 73–75, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1996/10/the-joy-of-living-the-great-plan-of-happiness>, accessed June 21, 2025.

16. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 84–89.

17. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 101–108.

18. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 95–102.

19. “Participant D,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 30, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

20. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stand Strong Against the Wiles of the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 98–101, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/10/stand-strong-against-the-wiles-of-the-world>, accessed July 15, 2025.

21. Thomas S. Monson, *Pathways to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 114–17.

22. Russell M. Nelson, “The Love and Laws of God,” devotional address, Brigham Young University, September 17, 2019, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/russell-m-nelson/love-laws-god>, accessed July 15, 2025.

These teachings shaped curriculum, instruction, and employment practices within S&I. In 2009, for example, Relief Society general president Julie B. Beck referred to *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* as a “reaffirmation” of eternal roles and encouraged S&I instructors to teach motherhood and fatherhood as doctrinal imperatives.²³ While these roles are framed in eternal terms, their interpretation has often drawn upon culturally specific models—particularly the mid-twentieth-century nuclear family. This model, characterized by a breadwinning father, a stay-at-home mother, and dependent children, was promoted during the Cold War as a symbol of American moral and political stability in contrast to Communism.²⁴ As a result, doctrinal statements about gender and family roles were sometimes conflated with historically contingent social norms that reflected the cultural moment as much as eternal principles.

Yet this vision overlooks the LDS church’s earlier family models—including plural marriage, adoption sealings, and communal child-rearing—which complicate claims of timelessness.²⁵ Critics have also noted the *Proclamation*’s lack of explicit scriptural basis and argued that it reflects late-twentieth-century cultural anxieties more than enduring revelation.²⁶ Within S&I, these historical and cultural overlays contributed to employment expectations that privileged married men with children. At the same time, women, single individuals, and those with non-traditional family arrangements often encountered marginalization or conditional inclusion.

The Evolution of Policy and Practice Within S&I

S&I has maintained teachings on gender and family. Its employment structures reflected a rigid alignment with traditional family models, with male priesthood holders occupying nearly all full-time and teaching and leadership roles, while administrators systematically excluded mothers or those who were divorced from paid positions.²⁷ These restrictions were reinforced by both formal policies and an

23. Julie B. Beck, “Teaching the Doctrine of the Family,” *Ensign*, March 2011, 12–17, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2011/03/teaching-the-doctrine-of-the-family>, accessed July 15, 2025.

24. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 23–52; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

25. Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 142–53.

26. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 95–102.

27. April Young-Bennett, “LDS Church Educational System Employment Policies for Mothers,” *Exponent II* blog, January 3, 2012, <https://exponentii.org/blog/lds-church-educational-system-employment-policies-for-mothers>, accessed May 9, 2025.

institutional culture that viewed domestic motherhood as incompatible with spiritual and professional authority.²⁸

This exclusionary logic stemmed from broader twentieth-century shifts in church governance, including the correlation movement, which centralized male priesthood control and redefined women's roles as auxiliary and subordinate. Scholars such as Maxine Hanks, Jill Mulvay Derr, and Matthew Bowman have traced the marginalization of women's institutional voice during this period, noting how retrenchment efforts narrowed prior models of female leadership.²⁹ Though some women gained visibility in church service in the early 2000s, their roles remained framed by traditional ideals of nurturing and supportive labor.³⁰

In the 2010s, church leaders introduced a series of reforms that increased women's visibility in institutional life. The minimum age for missionary service was lowered, Sister Training Leader roles were created, women were invited to pray in General Conference, and their participation in ward and stake councils expanded.³¹ These developments signaled a growing recognition of women's spiritual capacity and institutional contribution. At the same time, church leaders continued to emphasize traditional family roles, warning against the perceived dangers of professional ambition. In 2013, for example, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles cautioned women not to prioritize careers over family responsibilities.³² On another occasion, he remarked: "I've had many young men say, 'I don't think young women today are interested in being married. I can't find anybody

28. Tad Walch, "LDS Women with Children Now Eligible for Full-Time Seminary, Institute Jobs," *Deseret News*, November 14, 2014, <https://www.deseret.com/2014/11/14/20552727/lds-women-with-children-now-eligible-for-full-time-seminary-institute-jobs>, accessed July 5, 2025.

29. Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016).

30. Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman, eds., *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016).

31. "Church Lowers Age Requirement for Missionary Service," Newsroom of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (October 2012), <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-lowers-age-requirement-for-missionary-service>, accessed July 27, 2025; "Church Adjusts Mission Organization to Implement 'Mission Leadership Council,'" Newsroom of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (April 2013), <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-adjusts-mission-organization-implementation-leadership-council>, accessed July 27, 2025; "Mormon Conference: First Prayer by Woman Offered," *The Denver Post*, April 6, 2013, <https://www.denverpost.com/2013/04/07/mormon-conference-first-prayer-by-woman-offered>, accessed July 27, 2025.

32. Dallin H. Oaks, "No Other Gods," General Conference, October 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/no-other-gods>, accessed July 20, 2025.

because they're all committed to their careers,' and that does stand in the way of marriage, and it frightens off shy young men, for whom we should feel so sorry."³³

Even as S&I leaders continued to permit women with children at home and divorced individuals to serve as volunteer seminary teachers or secretaries, they maintained their exclusion from paid classroom positions. These limitations were not merely logistical but reflected deeper cultural assumptions about gender roles—particularly the belief that women's primary responsibilities were domestic and that their professional engagement should not disrupt male authority or spiritual influence. Even when unspoken, such policies reinforced the idea that women's behavior and presence were significant primarily in terms of their impact on men, subtly shaping expectations that women's roles should accommodate and support male development rather than reflect independent spiritual or professional callings.

Public scrutiny of these practices intensified around the same time the church confronted growing pressure related to gender equity, including the rise of the Ordain Women movement.³⁴ Though the movement was swiftly rebuffed and its founder excommunicated in 2014, its visibility underscored the tensions between institutional authority and evolving gender expectations. As a former S&I preservice trainer recalled, S&I explicitly privileged married applicants: "If we have a single prospective teacher and a married prospective teacher ... we would likely hire the married employee."³⁵ This preference, reflective of broader church teachings, reinforced a narrow model of family conformity that governed access to employment.

In November 2014, S&I announced a major policy change: mothers and divorced individuals who remarried would no longer be automatically excluded from full-time teaching roles. The change was presented as administrative rather than doctrinal, reaffirming the church's core values while acknowledging diverse family circumstances. Administrator Chad Webb emphasized that candidates would still be held to exemplary standards of marriage and family life, but that family structure alone would no longer disqualify otherwise qualified applicants.

Scholars describe this approach as "adaptive legitimation"—a strategy that allows for practical reform without disrupting theological continuity.³⁶ Rather than

33. Dallin H. Oaks, "A Conversation with Elder Dallin H. Oaks and his wife, Kristen," *The Mormon Channel*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXkqqPbKiTw>, accessed July 26, 2025.

34. Bennett, "LDS Church Educational System Employment Policies for Mothers."

35. "Participant A," interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 9, 2025, oral history transcript, in author's possession.

36. The term adaptive legitimation refers to institutional strategies that preserve perceived theological continuity while enacting substantive change. Rather than presenting reforms as departures from doctrine, church leaders often frame them as timely applications of eternal principles, thus maintaining authority while responding to shifting social conditions. This rhetorical approach enables flexibility without conceding theological disruption. For related frameworks, see Mark L. McConkie and R. Wayne Boss, "Od Values and Mormonism: Creating Adaptive Systems," *Public Administration Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2006): 115, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3109888>.

portraying change as a concession, church leaders framed the shift as consistent with divine principles and timely revelation.³⁷ This rhetorical strategy mirrors earlier transitions in church history, such as the 1890 declaration on plural marriage,³⁸ the 1978 revelation on race,³⁹ and the 2015 imposition of the baptismal restriction on children of LGBTQ+ parents, followed by its lifting in 2019.⁴⁰

The effects of prior exclusionary policies lingered even after reforms were implemented. One former teacher, who had been required to resign upon becoming a mother, described how the policy had shaped her life for decades. “I had to leave. And I was devastated,” she recalled. Though she spent fifteen years seeking part-time opportunities, none were made available. When the 2014 policy revision finally permitted mothers to return to full-time teaching, she eagerly rejoined S&I—but found that old assumptions had not entirely disappeared. “I got emails that said, ‘Are you the secretary? Who are you?’” she recounted. The question betrayed an enduring discomfort with women in teaching roles, particularly those whose paths had not followed the normative trajectory. “It was my passion,” she explained. “I felt it was my calling.” Her story highlights how structural change, while necessary, proved insufficient to undo the cultural hierarchies that continued to define belonging within the system.⁴¹

Policy alone could not dismantle the deeper cultural and theological structures that continued to shape institutional life. After the 2014 policy revision, employees who did not fit the church’s ideal of a temple-married family still faced significant obstacles in obtaining full-time teaching positions. Although most called seminary teachers and public-school educators were women, the near absence of full-time female religious educators silently reinforced the message that professional gospel teaching was a role reserved for faithful men. Beneath the surface of reform, educators continued to navigate a landscape marked by implicit hierarchies, moral judgments, and institutional blind spots. The following section draws on firsthand

org/10.1177/073491490603000106; and Mark C. Suchman, “Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches,” *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): 571–610, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258788>.

37. David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 164–70.

38. Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

39. See Matthew L. Harris, *Second-Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); and W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

40. See Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Mormon Church to Allow Baptisms, Blessings for Children of LGBT Parents, Reversing 2015 Policy,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/04/04/mormon-church-allow-baptisms-blessings-children-lgbt-parents-reversing-policy/>, accessed June 17, 2025.

41. “Participant F,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 8, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

accounts to illuminate how these embodied boundaries were experienced and contested by those working within the system.

Embodied Boundaries: Employees' Experiences

Drawing on oral history interviews, this section examines how these normative ideals have shaped the lived experiences of educators across three identity categories. The first subsection explores the experiences of women in S&I, focusing on how gendered hierarchies constrained opportunities for leadership and advancement. The second analyzes the position of single employees—especially single women—who frequently encountered stigma, institutional suspicion, and social surveillance. The third addresses the challenges faced by divorced educators, whose personal histories were often read as incompatible with both spiritual authority and professional trust.

Women and the Gendered Structures of Legitimacy

Female employees who adhered to traditional gender expectations and worked in support roles occasionally advanced, but typically only if they avoided challenging institutional assumptions. A recently retired administrative assistant who spent her career working for S&I described the careful strategies required to be heard in male-dominated spaces. “If I had said, ‘This is how it is,’ they would have dismissed me, because I was a woman, I was young, and I was not a teacher.” Without the authority conferred by priesthood or instructional roles, she learned to frame contributions in deferential terms: “It wasn’t about manipulation. It was about survival.” Over time, trust came—but only after years of quiet navigation. “The policies have changed,” she reflected, “but I’m not sure the culture has caught up. There’s still a sense of who belongs and who doesn’t.” Her experience highlights how institutional legitimacy for women often depended less on formal competence than on conformity to unspoken norms.⁴²

A single mother who spent her career in administrative positions at church headquarters reflected, “I think it was the era that I started. I think that it was tradition. I think that it was sexism.” Though her path was shaped by necessity—“You just do what you do when you’re a single mom”—she expressed both gratitude for stability and awareness of the limitations imposed by institutional culture: “I was grateful to have a job with benefits.” Advancement came slowly and often without formal recognition, and any deviation from expected norms—especially for single women—risked marginalization. Even minor adjustments to workplace policy signaled deeper cultural inertia. “Eight months before I retired,” she recalled with a

42. “Participant I,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 2, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

laugh, “women could wear pants. It was a big deal.”⁴³ Her experience underscores how women in supportive roles navigated a system that offered security and purpose but seldom extended equal legitimacy or visible authority.

Others echoed these themes, noting how workplace inclusion for women—particularly those who were single—often hinged on informal support rather than structural reform. A retired church employee who spent her career in S&I described her experience as largely positive, thanks to colleagues who “didn’t think that those norms were okay or normal.” Still, she acknowledged persistent institutional blind spots: “I think the church is catching up as a whole,” she reflected, “but single people are a population that they don’t really know what to do with.” She recalled seeing older female employees quietly pushed out near retirement and others burdened with unequal workloads. Her observations also pointed to a broader pattern of inconsistency: “The church wants it both ways,” she noted, alternating between gospel principles and corporate policies as suited institutional interests.⁴⁴ Her reflections illustrate how even women who avoided confrontation and conformed outwardly to expectations often had to navigate behind-the-scenes tensions between faith, gender, and institutional legitimacy.

Despite the increasing number of women in S&I, senior leadership remained overwhelmingly male. Several women described their positions as performative, meant to signal inclusion without granting meaningful authority: “[women’s] ideas were often filtered through male colleagues,” explained one woman, noting that initiatives to support women’s advancement were frequently delayed by institutional hesitancy, often framed as concerns about timing or doctrinal propriety.⁴⁵

Even in non-instructional or technical domains, female leadership remained the exception rather than the norm. A longtime manager in the S&I technology division during the early 2000s recalled being told explicitly that she was “the only one” in such a position. While widely respected by her team and credited with building a positive, high-functioning culture, she also encountered male subordinates who struggled with her leadership: “He would come in and punch me on the shoulder like you were in high school ... he didn’t know how to work with a girl, especially when it was his boss.” Field personnel similarly questioned her technical expertise: “They thought I was a woman and I wouldn’t know what I was talking about.” In such cases, she relied on male peers to absorb confrontational interactions. Despite these challenges, she prioritized relational trust over institutional authority: “I always wanted to make sure ... my people on the phones were happy

43. “Participant B,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, May 23, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

44. “Participant H,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 11 and 12, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

45. “Participant B,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, May 23, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

... and they still will say that it was the best time of their career.”⁴⁶ Her experience highlights how women in S&I often had to repeatedly demonstrate competence to earn legitimacy.

One administrative assistant, encouraged by a senior leader to pursue a coordinator role, reflected candidly: “There is no career path ... it’s all lip service. They’re not interested in letting admins go to coordinator.” She added a blunt assessment of the institution’s gender dynamics: “There was a time ... when the teachers—women—if they got married or had a baby, they had to quit. So what have I seen? The difference? I would say we’re 40 years behind society in how our women are treated as church employees.”⁴⁷ Her observation highlights how slowly institutional norms have shifted, despite advances in societal expectations for gender equity. While formal restrictions have eased, informal barriers—such as limited advancement opportunities and persistent assumptions about women’s roles—continue to define the working environment for many female employees. This disjuncture between external progress and internal policy underscores the challenges faced by women who seek not just inclusion but structural parity. Reflecting on evolving norms, a male religious educator noted that even the language used in church talks, such as Benson’s “The Gospel Teacher and His Message,” would now seem outdated. He praised the growing presence of full-time female religious educators, particularly the influence they had on his own daughter, while acknowledging how rare such models once were.⁴⁸

Recent appointments, including Rebecca Scott and Linda Sirrine, represent a modest shift. Their rise to senior administrative roles from outside the traditional religious educator pathway suggested an emerging openness to professional expertise and alternative leadership models. Yet their responsibilities remained largely administrative—structurally separated from curriculum, instruction, and ecclesiastical authority. These breakthroughs, while symbolically important, have not disrupted the gendered hierarchies at the core of S&I.

The Cultural Marginalization of Single Educators

While divorced individuals faced formal restrictions, single educators encountered a different set of barriers rooted less in policy than in perception. The institutional culture of S&I often placed an unspoken emotional burden on single educators, especially women. A female teacher and administrator recalled how pervasive this pressure felt: “My pain in being single was so deep for so long that I

46. “Participant E,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 3 and 10, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

47. “Participant C,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, May 23, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

48. “Participant A,” interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 9, 2025, oral history transcript, in author’s possession.

couldn't even sit through a prayer when someone prayed for the singles . . . I just felt broken." This spiritual and emotional isolation was compounded by persistent messaging, both explicit and implicit, that one's worthiness and influence were contingent upon marital status. Even within professional settings, single educators felt they had to overperform to be seen as legitimate or trustworthy, a dynamic that illustrates how family status became a form of institutional capital.

For single women, inclusion in S&I often came at the cost of constant self-monitoring. One woman noted, "I always had to be super on. I had to prove I was righteous. Because people assume things about single women—either you're weird or you're doing something wrong."⁴⁹ This need to overperform spiritually to counteract suspicion reveals the deeply gendered nature of legitimacy in S&I. While married men were presumed trustworthy by virtue of their priesthood and family roles, single women bore the burden of proving moral fitness simply to maintain baseline credibility. The expectations placed on them extended beyond professional competence to encompass personal behavior, emotional restraint, and outward displays of religiosity. Some learned to avoid disclosing too much about their home life or relationship status, adopting strategies of silence and redirection to manage how they were perceived. In this way, singlehood required not only faithfulness but constant vigilance—an invisible labor of respectability that rarely applied to their married peers. Another woman explained: "I just feel like single people are a population that they don't really kind of know what to do with."⁵⁰ Her observation underscores the institution's difficulty in imagining adult spiritual authority outside of marriage.

Unmarried male teachers also faced structural bias. S&I leaders often interpreted bachelorhood as evidence of spiritual immaturity. These men encountered doubts about their leadership capacity, emotional stability, or stewardship in the priesthood. Their lack of a spouse was sometimes perceived as a lack of responsibility, which in turn raised suspicions about their personal discipline or doctrinal depth. These patterns reinforced a narrow and idealized model of institutional legitimacy—one that elevated marital conformity as a precondition for spiritual and professional trustworthiness. Employees who did not fit this model encountered limited opportunities for advancement, revealing how theological ideals functioned not only as doctrine but as instruments of professional gatekeeping.

Even for those who excelled in the classroom and fulfilled all formal requirements, the absence of a spouse operated as a subtle disqualification—a quiet question mark over their capacity to represent the church's ideal. While rarely made explicit in policy, these dynamics shaped the day-to-day experiences of single

49. Ibid.

50. "Participant H," interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 11 and 12, 2025, oral history transcript, in author's possession.

educators and influenced how they were mentored, evaluated, and promoted. In effect, singlehood functioned as a soft but consequential boundary: one that filtered who was seen, who was trusted, and who was allowed to lead.

The Institutional Exclusion of Divorced Educators

Divorced educators encountered especially acute stigma. Church members have historically framed divorce as a spiritual failure, casting divorced individuals as morally compromised and unfit to serve as role models. One interviewee's recollection of a Seminary principal forced into dismissal after his wife's infidelity offers a window into the human cost of rigid policy. "He broke down and was quite tender ... about his fears," he recalled. The administrator was later quietly reassigned to a less visible "talent pool" position, revealing how institutional compassion often remained unofficial and inconsistent.⁵¹

For one employee, the institutional restrictions on divorced women felt both deeply personal and unjust. After her divorce, she remembered grieving that she could no longer teach Seminary and blaming her ex-husband for the resulting loss. Yet over time, she found healing and purpose in her work within S&I: "It was really, I think, my lifesaver ... to work at the Institute with the kids." She expressed gratitude for the church's growing recognition that individuals should not be disqualified "by how many children you have or if you ... happen to have been divorced," and she welcomed the expansion of leadership roles available to women. Her story reflects both the enduring cost of exclusionary policies and the spiritual resilience with which many women continued to serve.⁵²

S&I administrators frequently reassigned or quietly terminated divorced men, citing concerns about their fitness to teach. However, one recently divorced religious educator has described a shift in institutional culture that has occurred in just the past few years. He emotionally described a private conversation with a senior S&I leader about his divorce, explaining: "Not one probing question. ... Just completely supportive."⁵³ Such support, though still dependent on individual leaders and exceptions to policy, marked a quiet evolution in pastoral care.

The professional cost of divorce could be profound, but so too could its eventual impact on empathetic teaching. After navigating a divorce, a religious educator recalled a colleague's counsel: "You won't become the poster child of divorce in Seminaries and Institutes ... but [some] will hear the gospel differently ... because

51. "Participant A," interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 9, 2025, oral history transcript, in author's possession.

52. "Participant G," interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 1, 2025, oral history transcript, in author's possession.

53. "Participant A," interview by Eric Paul Rogers, April 9, 2025, oral history transcript, in author's possession.

it aligns with their own personal experience.”⁵⁴ His experience underscores the quiet power of representation, even within institutional constraints.

The Lived Experience of Institutional Boundaries

The oral histories gathered in this study reveal that gender and marital status have served as institutional boundary markers within S&I, shaping who is deemed trustworthy, authoritative, and spiritually legitimate. Access to full-time employment and leadership has often depended on conformity to a narrow ideal of Latter-day Saint adulthood: male, married, and temple-worthy. Those outside this mold—women, divorced individuals, and single adults—have encountered barriers that limited their visibility and advancement.

While formal policies have shifted, institutional culture has often lagged. Unwritten norms and doctrinal framings continue to enforce what Joan Acker calls a “gendered logic” of belonging.⁵⁵ These embodied boundaries serve as mechanisms of gatekeeping, requiring individuals to adapt to institutional ideals at significant personal and spiritual cost.

Within this context, reform has remained slow and uneven. Cultural resistance, doctrinal framing, and a sustained avoidance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) language have limited broad institutional change, even as some leaders pursued quiet efforts toward greater inclusion. At the national level, recent federal reversals dismantled DEI offices and discouraged equity-based hiring practices in government and education. These actions signaled a shift away from inclusion mandates and reinforced institutional autonomy—particularly for religious organizations shielded by First Amendment protections.⁵⁶

In Utah, this trend was intensified by the 2024 “Equal Opportunity Initiatives” law, which prohibited public institutions from using DEI-related language, led to the closure of university DEI offices and cultural centers, and mandated compliance reporting.⁵⁷ In this policy environment, S&I has remained largely insulated from external accountability, continuing to operate within a framework shaped by restrictive norms around gender and family. Under these conditions, lived

54. Ibid.

55. Joan Acker, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations,” *Gender & Society* 4, no. 2 (1990): 139–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>.

56. See *U.S. Department of Education Takes Action to Eliminate DEI Initiatives*, January 23, 2025, <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-takes-action-eliminate-dei>, accessed August 3, 2025.

57. Johanna Alonso, “Utah VP on DEI Closures: ‘It’s Been a Grieving Process,’” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 29, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/diversity/2024/08/29/dei-division-closure-has-been-grieving-process-utah>, accessed July 20, 2025.

experience, informal advocacy, and local discretion have often played a greater role than formal policy in expanding the boundaries of inclusion.

Conclusion

Over the past four decades, S&I has served as a key site for negotiating the meaning of gender and family within the LDS church. While the 2014 reversal of employment restrictions on mothers and divorced individuals marked a watershed moment, this reform did not constitute a wholesale transformation. Instead, it revealed the contours of a gradual and contested process in which institutional adaptation remained bound by an enduring theological framework—one that equates spiritual authority with temple marriage and holding the priesthood.

This study demonstrates that S&I has served as more than a religious educational institution—it has operated as a gatekeeping system through which doctrinal ideals are not only taught but also embodied, enacted, and enforced. Eligibility to teach or lead has often hinged not solely on faithfulness or competence, but on conformity to a model of idealized Latter-day Saint adulthood. For those who fell outside that model, employment remained tenuous, contingent, or foreclosed. Even when formal policies softened, informal expectations and hidden curricula maintained institutional boundaries.⁵⁸

Reforms in S&I have often relied on a process of adaptive legitimation, allowing leaders to respond to shifting social and economic realities without disrupting the appearance of doctrinal continuity. These strategies stabilized authority even as they made room for selective inclusion, typically for women or divorced individuals whose personal circumstances did not overtly challenge norms. Yet because S&I is arguably the most influential church-sponsored educational program for youth and young adults outside of formal worship, its institutional culture carries formative weight. What students observe in their teachers—who is included, trusted, and promoted—shapes their assumptions about who belongs in the church and under what conditions. In this way, patterns of selective inclusion may inadvertently reinforce broader cultural biases, perpetuating forms of exclusion in the rising generation.

Historiographically, this article contributes the most comprehensive account to date of gendered and marital employment norms in S&I, bringing together oral history, policy, theology, and institutional culture. It integrates feminist and organizational perspectives to examine how authority is constructed not only through

58. “Hidden curricula” refer to the informal norms, values, and expectations that operate alongside official teachings in shaping institutional culture. In S&I, this includes unspoken assumptions about gender roles, marital status, and spiritual worthiness that influence hiring, evaluation, and legitimacy, often without explicit acknowledgment in policy or doctrine. These implicit messages are communicated through workplace interactions, leadership preferences, and cultural cues, reinforcing traditional hierarchies even amid formal reforms.

doctrine but also through practice. It also situates S&I within broader discussions of gender and institutional power in Mormonism—where it has too often been overlooked as a site of structural regulation and potential reform.

At the same time, the study is marked by key limitations. Most of the oral histories come from long-serving employees who remained institutionally loyal; voices of those who exited, were excluded, or resisted remain underrepresented. In particular, the experiences of women who challenged institutional norms and younger generations navigating emerging contradictions merit further attention. These silences underscore the need for future research that centers on marginalized perspectives and interrogates the constraints on what can be said—and preserved—within church settings.

Change has not proceeded through consistent liberalization but rather through moments of contradiction, negotiated compromise, and selective accommodation. As S&I continues to shape the religious education of Latter-day Saint youth worldwide, its evolving policies reflect how the church as a whole navigates the tensions between modern social norms and enduring theological commitments. The regulation of gender and family within S&I offers a particularly revealing case study of how ecclesiastical authority is exercised, how boundaries of belonging are maintained, and how institutional priorities are operationalized in daily religious life. These dynamics are not confined to S&I—they illuminate broader patterns of adaptation, control, and negotiation within contemporary Mormonism.⁵⁹ To trace these patterns is to better understand the LDS church's evolving strategies for preserving coherence while responding to social change.

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59. While this article focuses on gender and marital status, future research should examine how sexual orientation shapes inclusion and exclusion within S&I. Available evidence suggests that queer individuals who remain in church employment are typically those who conform to institutional expectations around celibacy, heteronormative gender presentation, and public silence regarding LGBTQ+ issues. This pattern reflects a broader institutional tendency to accommodate difference only insofar as it does not disrupt prevailing norms. A fuller account of S&I's institutional culture will require attention to how sexuality—like gender and family—functions as a category of spiritual and professional gatekeeping.

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