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# Gender Distribution of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Worldwide

*Arielle A. Sloan, Ray M. Merrill, and J. Grant Merrill*

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown significantly since it was organized in 1830,<sup>1</sup> and by the end of 2012, Church membership reached 14,782,473.<sup>2</sup> However, the Church has not grown in a uniform manner in terms of geographical region,<sup>3</sup> gender, or age.

Analyzing disparities in membership growth between men and women, especially by age group and geographical location, may provide us with a deeper understanding of Church growth, conversion, and member retention in a variety of ways. For example, balanced gender growth among young adults makes it easier for more individuals to marry, have and raise children within the Church, and remain religiously active as a family.<sup>4</sup> Imbalanced growth in terms of gender, on the other hand, may lead marriage-age individuals to seek partners at a later age, remain single, or marry outside the faith, which can lead to decreased family religious involvement.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, gender balance within specific geographic regions has implications for local congregational growth. Even in order to establish a branch, which is the Church's smallest congregational unit in a geographical zone, at least one member living in the area must be a male who holds the Melchizedek Priesthood and can lead the congregation.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, in regions with low male conversion and retention rates, Church growth becomes difficult. In regions with low female conversion and retention, on the other hand, many largely female-run Church programs suffer, such as the Relief Society (for adult women), the Young Women program (for girls age 12–17) and the Primary organization (for children ages 18 months to 11 years). Since retention and activity in the

Latter-day Saint religion, like many religions, is associated in part with social support,<sup>7</sup> members or potential converts to the Church may have difficulty joining or remaining active if their local congregation has few individuals of their same age group and gender to befriend.

While overall patterns of Church growth have been studied for many years,<sup>8</sup> and gender disparities in growth have been discussed for a variety of religious communities,<sup>9</sup> little, if any, research has been recently published on gender-based growth patterns in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This study will add to the current literature by assessing how gender ratios in the LDS Church differed according to age and UN world region in 2011. We hypothesize that Church growth was more balanced by gender in North America, where the Church is better established, than elsewhere in the world. We also expect that the overall gender distribution will at least reflect the world gender distribution among the younger age groups, when children attend Church with their parents. The ratio may diverge from the world distribution pattern in older age, when one gender may be more likely to remain active or convert to the Church than the other.

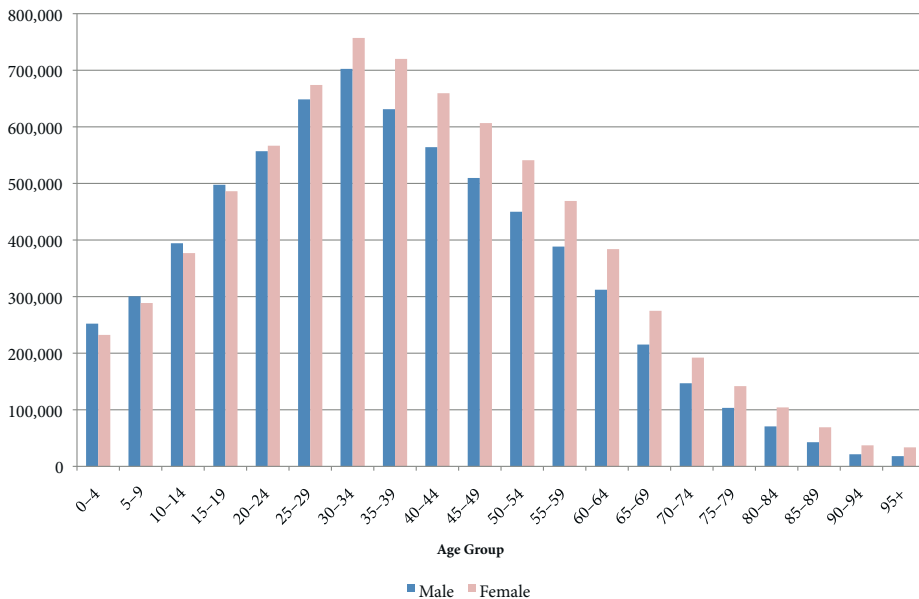
## **Methods**

This study is based on world population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau and Church membership data from the Church's Management Information Center. Data were obtained for the year 2011. The gender ratio was calculated by dividing the number of males by the number of females within five-year age groups. Gender ratios were presented by seven regions throughout the world: South America (Latin America and the Caribbean), Europe (eastern, northern, southern, and western), Asia (east, south-central, southeastern, and western), Australia, North America, Pacific, and Africa (eastern, middle, northern, southern, and western).

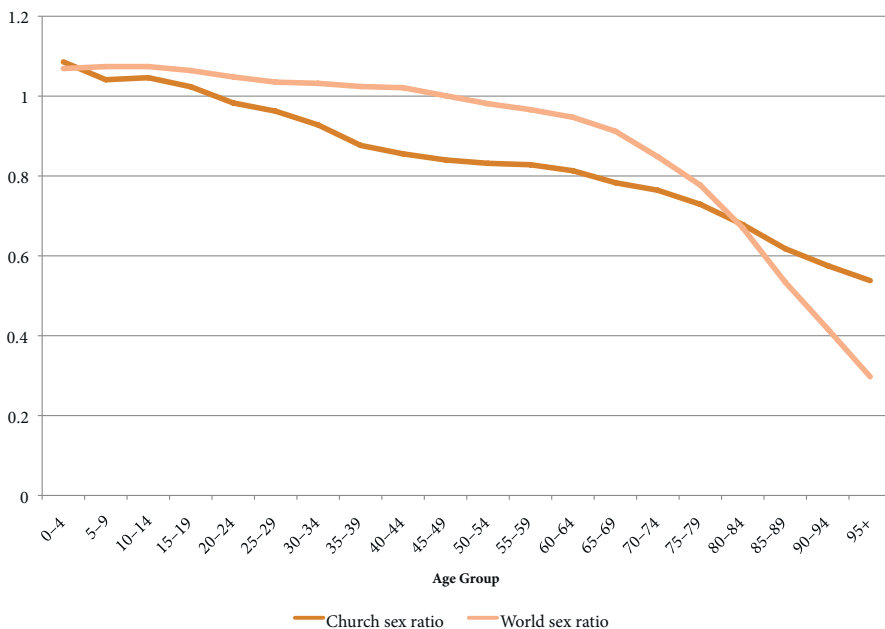
## **Results**

The numbers of males and females in the Church are presented across the age span in figure 1. In 2011, there were more males in the Church than females through the age group 15–19. For comparison, in figure 2 we also present the 2011 world gender ratio, which shows that more males existed than females through the age group 40–44. In the age group 80–84, the gender ratio (67:100) was similar between the Church and the world population. By age 95+, the ratio of males to females was 54:100 in the Church and 30:100 in the world.

**FIGURE 1. Latter-day Saint Church Population for Males and Females across the Age Span, 2011**



**FIGURE 2. Male:Female Sex Ratio, 2011**



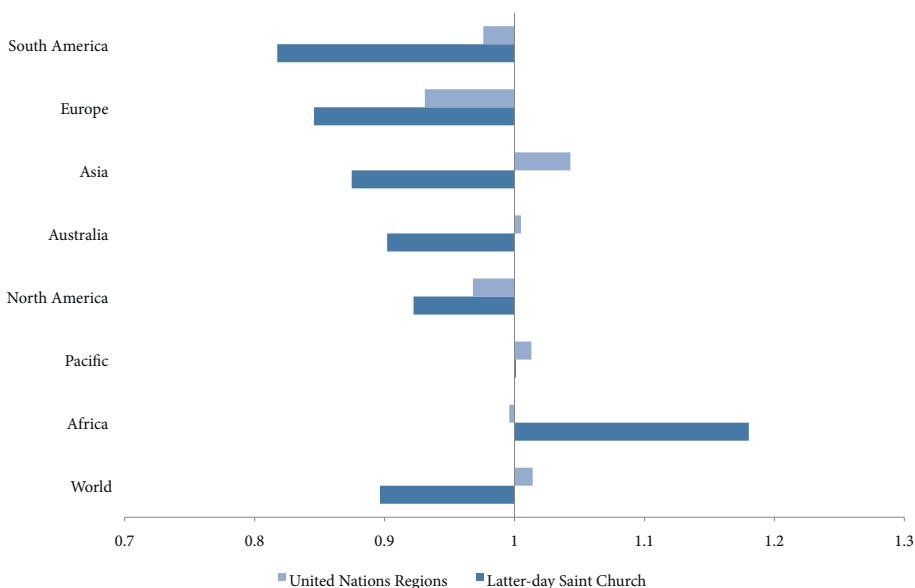
The total Church membership consisted of 90 males for every 100 females in 2011. By contrast, in the entire world's population, there were 101 males for every 100 females (fig. 3). Only in Africa did the ratio of males to females in the Church exceed 1 (118 males for every 100 females). This region also exhibited the greatest difference in the gender ratios between the Church and the world. The next largest difference in gender ratios between the Church and the world was in Asia, followed by South America, Australia, Europe, North America, and finally the Pacific.

## Discussion

The information contained in this study is only a surrogate for the data that, unfortunately, are not available on a worldwide or regional scale: that is, the number of religiously active individuals in the Church community. Religious activity can more accurately indicate potential strengths in terms of Church growth than membership on Church records. Religious activity or involvement reflects regular association with other members and the adoption of certain doctrinal beliefs and patterns for conducting personal and social life (for example, adopting specific health behaviors).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address all the ways in which discrepancies between religious involvement and membership statistics can influence interpretation of Church growth potential. To illustrate one example, the ratio of males to females as shown in figure 2 balances during the ages 15–24, which could be interpreted as saying that young adult and youth programs have generally even ratios of males to females. However, one study found that Latter-day Saint teen girls in the United States attended Church meetings less frequently than their male counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is possible that some programs for young males in many parts of the country have more potential for continued growth than programs for females, even with a balanced gender ratio on Church membership records.

With this in mind, readers should understand that membership statistics presented here have limited implications for proportions of male priesthood holders, active convert retention, or the gender ratio present in congregations, because these factors depend on activity and personal belief rather than on listed membership. In the remaining discussion, we will focus primarily on the three elements that do affect official Church records: births in the Church community, conversions to the Church, and loss due to either death or officially removing one's name from Church records.

**FIGURE 3. Male:Female Sex Ratio According to Geographic Region, 2011**

Beginning at birth, the large ratio of males to females in the Church simply reflects world statistics (fig. 2). Parents in the Church have greater influence over their children's institutional religious practices in their younger years, and individuals often become teenagers or adults before they consider leaving the Church or removing their names from Church records.<sup>11</sup>

The gender ratio equalizes and then reverses much sooner for the Church than the world. This fact may indicate that females are more likely to remain on the records of the Church through time than men and that converts to the Church are more likely to be female. In later age, while both the Church and the world experience a decreasing ratio of males to females, the Church gender ratio remains closer to one, perhaps because male Church members pursue a healthier lifestyle and maintain greater social support than males in the general population.

The changing gender ratio for the Church through the lifespan of its members has important implications, especially for the rising generation. Interestingly enough, the gender ratio is most balanced among Latter-day Saints in the 15–24 age group, while the gender ratio in the general population is still slightly skewed toward males during that period. Again, the gender ratio among actively religious members,

especially in specific world regions, may differ from these statistics. However, if the two are similar, this bodes well for future growth within the Church. This is because Latter-day Saints tend to seek out partners of their own faith<sup>12</sup> and marry at a younger age than average (in 2007, it was estimated that Latter-day Saints marry at an average age of 23 years, as opposed to 25 nationally for females and 27 for males in the United States).<sup>13</sup> Latter-day Saint families add tremendously to official statistics on Church growth because one-third of Church growth annually occurs as a result of children born to Latter-day Saint parents.<sup>14</sup>

Having a higher percentage of females listed on membership records in later age is not unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and it may indicate that women are genuinely more involved in the Church than men. Several studies have shown that adult women are more inclined than men to practice and believe in institutional religion within a Christian ideology.<sup>15</sup> For example, a 2009 American poll showed that women were more likely than men to pray daily, affiliate themselves with a religion, say that religion is very important in their lives, attend services at least weekly, have an absolute certainty that God exists, and believe in a personal God.<sup>16</sup>

While the exact reason for higher female participation and belief in Christian institutional religion is unknown, many theories have been proposed on the subject. Some have suggested that Christianity stresses values that women are socialized to develop, such as peacemaking and nurturing; others argue that Christian denominations allow for more female participation and leadership than religions such as Islam and Judaism.<sup>17</sup> In Great Britain, the feminization of the Anglican Church has been ascribed to the rise of women in clergy positions, which has motivated some traditionalist male clergymen and attendees to leave the faith.<sup>18</sup>

While each of these theories, as well as other physiological and cultural factors, plays a role in the female interest in Christianity,<sup>19</sup> social and financial factors may specifically skew the Latter-day Saint gender ratio as both groups age. For example, several studies have shown that women are more socially inclined than men,<sup>20</sup> which means that the variety of volunteer-run programs in which Latter-day Saint women can participate, such as the Relief Society, may be particularly attractive for potential female converts.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Church has a large and active global humanitarian aid program.<sup>22</sup> Church statistics do not show who receives aid in terms of gender, but adult women worldwide have higher poverty rates than men.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the humanitarian

aid that the Church provides to non-Mormons may give poorer individuals, more of whom are women, positive exposure to the Church.

The Church gender ratio surpasses that of the world after age 85, which shows either that males on the records of the Church live longer than males globally or that their deaths are being reported late on membership records. This may result if men are more likely than women to lose contact with the Church. We will not focus on the latter idea, because data are not available that show to what extent this occurs. However, the former concept agrees with data from a recent UCLA study showing that 25-year-old Latter-day Saints in California who attended Church weekly, were married, had never smoked, and had at least 12 years of education enjoyed some of the highest life expectancies in the world: 84 years for males and 86 for females.<sup>24</sup> That two-year life expectancy gender gap among Church members is almost three times smaller than among the general U.S. population, where men are expected to live to age 76 and females to age 81.<sup>25</sup> The small life expectancy gender gap may exist because Latter-day Saint males, like females, receive encouragement to eat nutritiously, refrain from alcohol and tobacco, attain as much education as possible, and focus on family values.<sup>26</sup> Focusing on family values may be especially helpful for male Latter-day Saint longevity, because an eight-decade study showed that married men experienced a greater boost to life expectancy than married women.<sup>27</sup>

The longevity benefits of being an active male in the Church may appear on official Church records, even though not all members are religiously active, because many less-active members still follow the health guidelines of the Church: a study of former missionaries who had returned from their missions 17 years prior found that 97 percent still followed the Word of Wisdom, even though only 87 percent attended Church services weekly.<sup>28</sup>

There are 101 males to every 100 females worldwide, but 90 males to every 100 females in the Church. There are more Latter-day Saint women than men in North America, Australia, Asia, Europe, and South America, which exceeds (in Europe and North and South America) or contradicts (in Australia and Asia) the general population gender ratio. Even in the Pacific, where Latter-day Saint men barely outnumber women, the proportion of men to women is lower than in the overall population. Potential reasons for a higher prevalence of females to males have already been discussed in this paper, but this finding shows that regional characteristics may affect gender ratio discrepancies on a local scale. For example, the UN region of Asia may have a higher



male-to-female gender ratio than the Church because it includes the nation of China, which does not have a significant Latter-day Saint population and has a very high ratio of male-to-female births.<sup>29</sup> The Pacific region may have a more balanced gender ratio than any other UN world region, in part because the Pacific Island cultures have a strong sense of collectivism and family unity.<sup>30</sup> If, for example, one parent joins the Church, the children and the spouse of that individual may be more likely to join as well.

The LDS ratio of males to females is high in Africa, in contrast with the rest of the world. One possible reason for the difference can be linked to cultural and religious practices on the continent. In Africa, the Muslim population is about 41 percent, while in Northern Africa it approaches 93 percent.<sup>31</sup> In Muslim-heavy countries, women often do not attend Friday prayers and the five daily prayers in the mosque, and they are not allowed to enter a mosque during menstruation.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it is possible that African women have less interest in the Church than men because the Islamic religion has set a cultural gender norm for religious participation. While the Church retains the same organizational structure around the world, cultural attitudes and gender expectations may affect male and female desires to become affiliated with the Church.

Research on Latter-day Saint gender distributions in specific world regions are sorely lacking, and more needs to be conducted.

## **Conclusion**

While more females are on the records of the Church than men, the Church gender ratio is near unity during the years when more members of the Church marry and shows a greater ratio of males to females in old age than the general world gender ratio. LDS gender ratios also vary widely by UN world region, which shows that cultural factors may impact the segments of the population that are most interested in participating in religion. More research needs to be conducted to understand how gender ratios among religiously active Church members impact local Church growth.

These findings do not mean that the gender ratio among religiously active members and the gender ratio among all members are equal, and by no means does it indicate that missionaries or local congregations should mechanically seek to balance local congregations by searching for only male or female converts. However, congregations that want to grow can continue to stress the importance of having strong marriages and families, make sure that organizations separated by distinct

gender and age groups (such as Young Men and Young Women organizations) are well supported, give converts and members social support, and ensure that both males and females feel useful and valued in the religious community.

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