

# Native American Women and the Wage Gap

NOVEMBER 2022

Conversations around the wage gap tend to over-focus on the numbers while ignoring the causes. But these numbers are more than facts and figures; they represent the tangible consequences of sexism and white supremacy in the United States and how our country systematically devalues women of color and their labor. While racism and sexism are often thought of as individual bias, history shows us that systemic discrimination in pay and exploitation of workers based on race, class, gender and immigration status can be traced all the way back to colonial attempts to destroy Native communities and continuing threats to tribal sovereignty; this country's horrific past of enslaving Africans and their descendants; and exclusionary and racially biased immigration policies that persist today.

Today this means that Native American women in the United States are typically paid just 51 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.<sup>1</sup> Even when looking just at people working full time, year-round, Native women are still only paid 57 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men — but that figure does not include the more than 40 percent of Native women who held part-time or short-term jobs in 2021.<sup>2</sup>

The wages of Native women are driven down by a number of factors that they are likely to encounter in the workplace and labor market, including gender and racial discrimination, workplace harassment, job segregation and a lack of workplace policies that support family caregiving, which is still most often performed by women.<sup>3</sup> Overall, women are typically paid 77 cents for every dollar paid to men.<sup>4</sup>

## Across Tribes, Wage Gaps Undermine Native Women's Economic Security.

- Native women in every tribe for which data is available experience large wage gaps compared to what white, non-Hispanic men are typically paid.
- Across these tribes, Yup'ik and Tohono O'odham women experience the largest

### Improving Data for Native Women

Women members of the 574 federally-recognized tribes and more than 200 unrecognized tribes in the United States have diverse economic experiences as well as share common challenges in the United States. But limited available data means it is difficult to reliably estimate wage gaps for most tribes. Federal agencies should prioritize partnering with tribal governments, Native experts and Native communities to develop better data about Native women's economic experiences in ways that respect tribal sovereignty. (See [National Congress of American Indians, "Data Disaggregation."](#))

gaps – typically paid more than \$28,000 less per year than white, non-Hispanic men. And even the smallest gap is still sizable at \$13,800, for Puget Sound Salish women.

Women's Median Earnings and Wage Gap by Tribe			
Tribe	Median Earnings	Wage Gap	Cents on the Dollar
Alaskan Athabaskan	\$31,600	\$16,900	\$0.65
Aleut	\$25,600	\$22,900	\$0.53
Inupiat	\$32,400	\$16,200	\$0.67
Yup'ik	\$20,400	\$28,100	\$0.42
Tlingit-Haida	\$29,100	\$19,500	\$0.60
Other Alaska Native	\$20,200	\$28,400	\$0.42
Apache	\$22,500	\$26,100	\$0.46
Blackfoot	\$21,100	\$27,500	\$0.43
Cherokee	\$26,000	\$22,600	\$0.54
Cheyenne	\$21,500	\$27,100	\$0.44
Chickasaw	\$28,200	\$20,400	\$0.58
Chippewa	\$24,800	\$23,800	\$0.51
Choctaw	\$25,200	\$23,400	\$0.52
Comanche	\$28,600	\$20,000	\$0.59
Creek	\$25,900	\$22,600	\$0.53
Crow	\$28,700	\$19,900	\$0.59
Iroquois	\$28,700	\$19,800	\$0.59
Lumbee	\$26,500	\$22,000	\$0.55
Navajo (Diné)	\$24,900	\$23,700	\$0.51
Pima	\$25,500	\$23,000	\$0.53
Potawatomie	\$29,900	\$18,600	\$0.62
Pueblo	\$25,700	\$22,900	\$0.53
Pueblo - Hopi	\$25,200	\$23,400	\$0.52
Puget Sound Salish	\$34,700	\$13,800	\$0.71
Seminole	\$28,200	\$20,400	\$0.58
Sioux	\$22,200	\$26,300	\$0.46
Tohono O'odham	\$20,400	\$28,100	\$0.42
Yaqui	\$25,200	\$23,400	\$0.52
Mexican American Indian*	\$21,100	\$27,500	\$0.43
South American Indian*	\$24,700	\$23,800	\$0.51

American Indian, tribe not elsewhere classified	\$25,800	\$22,800	\$0.53
American Indian, tribe not specified	\$23,900	\$24,700	\$0.49
All other specified American Indian tribe combinations	\$24,800	\$23,800	\$0.51
American Indian and Alaska Native, tribe not elsewhere classified	\$21,600	\$27,000	\$0.44
American Indian and Alaska Native, not specified	\$23,500	\$25,100	\$0.48

\* Disaggregated data for specific Indigenous tribes of Central and South America is not available.

*Source: Author's calculations using 2016–2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates via IPUMS. Figures are for American Indian and Alaska Native women aged 16 and older with earnings in the prior year, including AI/AN women who reported more than one race and/or Hispanic or Latina ethnicity, and are rounded to the nearest \$100. Wage gap is calculated based on national median earnings for white, non-Hispanic men, about \$48,600 in this time period.*

## How Does the Wage Gap Harm Native Women?

Overall, median wages for Native women in the United States are \$26,678 per year, compared to median wages of \$51,931 annually for white, non-Hispanic men. This amounts to a difference of \$25,253 each year.<sup>5</sup> These lost wages mean Native women have less money to support themselves and their families, save and invest for the future, and spend on goods and services. Families, businesses and the economy suffer as a result.

For example, if the wage gap were eliminated, on average, a Native woman would have enough money for approximately:

- More than two and a half years of child care;<sup>6</sup>
- More than two and a half additional years of tuition and fees for a four-year public university, or the full cost of tuition and fees for a two-year community college;<sup>7</sup>
- Nearly 17 additional months of premiums for employer-based health insurance;<sup>8</sup>
- Two and a half years (158 weeks) of food for her family;<sup>9</sup>
- Fifteen months of mortgage and utilities payments;<sup>10</sup>
- Almost two years of rent;<sup>11</sup>
- More than 21 additional years of birth control;<sup>12</sup> or
- Enough money to pay off the average student loan debt in about one and a half years.<sup>13</sup>

## **Native Women and Their Families Cannot Afford Discrimination and Lower Wages**

**Eliminating the wage gap would provide much-needed income to Native women whose wages sustain their households.**

- Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Native mothers are key breadwinners for their families, which means their households rely heavily on their wages to make ends meet and get ahead.<sup>14</sup>
- Nearly one in five Native family households – more than half a million households – are headed by women, and thirty percent of those households live below the poverty level.<sup>15</sup> Closing the wage gap would help Native women breadwinners provide for their families and be more economically secure.

## **The Public Overwhelmingly Supports Fair Pay Policies**

Polling ahead of the 2022 midterm elections found that economic concerns topped the list of issues Native women voters are worried about, including the cost of living (87 percent) and family income and expenses (69 percent). Large shares of Native women are also concerned about other issues that affect economic security, health and safety, including gun violence (62 percent), abortion and reproductive health services (55 percent) and affordable mental health services (54) percent).

Native women voters overwhelmingly rate policies to address economic, health and safety needs as important for Congress to act on, including:

- Comprehensive health coverage (85 percent);
- Domestic violence prevention and services (84 percent);
- Paid family and medical leave (83 percent);
- Ending workplace discrimination and harassment (83 percent);
- Preventing gun violence and mass shootings (82 percent);
- Protecting access to contraception (81 percent); and
- Strengthening equal pay laws (79 percent).<sup>16</sup>

## **What We Can Do to Fight for Pay Equity for Native Women**

Native women and their families urgently need the following to close the wage gap and to ensure their economic security and opportunity:

- Lawmakers should pass the **FAMILY Act and Healthy Families Act** to ensure all workers, regardless of job type and title, are able to take paid family and medical leave and paid sick days to care for their health and loved ones without losing income or a job. Employers can expand paid leave policies to be more equitable by

ensuring all employees are eligible – including those working part-time – and that policies are gender-neutral.

- To ensure fair pay, lawmakers must enact the **Paycheck Fairness Act** which would make it harder for employers to engage in sex-based wage discrimination and would institute data collection that will help inform future enforcement efforts. Employers should use wage transparency instead of salary history and conduct compensation reviews to evaluate noticeable disparities amongst employees in the same, or similar jobs.
- Lawmakers should pass the **Raise the Wage Act** to eliminate the discriminatory pay practices that plague employed women. Employers should use a reputable online tool to ensure employees are paid at least a wage that meets basic needs.<sup>17</sup>
- Lawmakers should enact the **BE HEARD Act** to expand protections against harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Employers should prohibit retaliation and discrimination for employees who choose to report workplace harassment.
- Lawmakers should enact the **Pregnant Workers Fairness Act** to ensure pregnant workers are not forced out of a job simply because they cannot access basic accommodations. Employers can make reasonable accommodations for an employee’s known limitations related to pregnancy or childbirth.

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2021 (Tables B20017C and B20017H: Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months (in 2021 Inflation-Adjusted dollars) by Sex by Work Experience in the Past 12 Months for the Population 16 Years and Over with Earnings in the Past 12 Month)*. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from data.census.gov. (Unpublished calculation based on the median annual pay for American Indian and Alaska Native women and white, non-Hispanic men).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2021 (Table B20005C: Sex by Work Experience in the Past 12 Months by Earnings in the Past 12 Months (in 2021 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) for the Population 16 Years and Over (American Indian and Alaska Native Alone)*). Retrieved 15 November 2022, from data.census.gov. (Unpublished calculation based on the number of Native American women with earnings in 2021 who worked full time, year-round and those with earnings who did not work full time, year-round.)

<sup>3</sup> Glynn, S. J. (2018, April). *Gender wage inequality: What we know and how we can fix it*. Retrieved 21 November 2022, from Washington Center for Equitable Growth website: <https://equitablegrowth.org/research-paper/gender-wage-inequality/?longform=true>

<sup>4</sup> See note 1.

<sup>5</sup> See note 1.

<sup>6</sup> Child Care Aware of America. (2022). *Demanding Change: Repairing Our Child Care System*. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from <https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system>. The authors note that the landscape of child care varies significantly from state to state and computing a single national average is complex. This analysis uses the average of program-weighted averages for center-based care for a four-year-old, \$9,715.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2022, January). *Digest of Education Statistics: 2021* (Table 330.10, Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level and control of institution: 1963-64 through 2020-21), Chapter 3. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21\\_330.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_330.10.asp) (The average total annual cost of undergraduate tuition and required fees is \$9,375 for a four-year public college or university or \$3,501 for a two-year college)

---

<sup>8</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation. (n.d.) Average Annual Single Premium per Enrolled Employee For Employer-Based Health Insurance, 2020. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/single-coverage/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Employee%20Contribution%22,%22sort%22:%22desc%22%7D>

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022, September). *Consumer Expenditures - 2021*. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cesan.pdf> (Calculation uses overall average “food” cost.)

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2021, Table DP04: Selected Housing Characteristics*. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from <https://data.census.gov/> (Calculation uses median monthly owner costs, housing units with a mortgage)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. (Calculation uses median gross rent, occupied units paying rent)

<sup>12</sup> Center for American Progress. (2012, February 15). *The High Costs of Birth Control: It's Not As Affordable As You Think*. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from [https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/02/pdf/BC\\_costs.pdf](https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/02/pdf/BC_costs.pdf) (Calculated from a survey of retail costs of oral contraceptives for the uninsured and average copays, combined with the average cost of doctor visits to obtain the prescription. While the Affordable Care Act greatly advanced access to birth control by requiring coverage of contraceptives without cost sharing, many women still must pay out of pocket because they lack insurance, because their plan is grandfathered and does not cover contraceptives without a copay, or because their plan only covers generics.)

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid. (n.d.) *Federal Student Loan Portfolio: Federal Student Aid Portfolio Summary*. National Student Loan Data System Publication. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from <https://studentaid.gov/data-center/student/portfolio>. (Average dollars outstanding for recipients of direct loans as of Q2 2022, \$37,633.)

<sup>14</sup> Shaw, E., Mason, C., Lacarte, V., & Jauregui, E. (2020, May). *Holding Up Half the Sky: Mothers as Workers, Primary Caregivers, & Breadwinners During COVID-19 (Table 1)*. Retrieved 15 September 2022, from the Institute for Women's Policy Research: <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Holding-Up-Half-the-Sky-Mothers-as-Breadwinners.pdf> (Breadwinner mothers are defined as single mothers who head a household or married mothers who generate at least 40 percent of a household's joint income.)

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2021, Table S0201: Selected Population Profile in the United States (American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination with one or more other races)*. Retrieved 15 November 2022, from <https://data.census.gov>

<sup>16</sup> YWCA USA and Finn Partners. (2022). *YWomensVote 2022 – Midterm Election Study*. Retrieved 8 November 2022, from <https://ywomenvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/20220826-YWomenVote-Memo-MidtermElectionStudy.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> See for example MIT's Living Wage Calculator, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, reproductive health and rights, access to quality, affordable health care and policies that help all people meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at [NationalPartnership.org](https://NationalPartnership.org).

© 2022 National Partnership for Women & Families. All rights reserved.