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Native American Women Can't Wait for Equal Pay

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Despite being original inhabitants and stewards of this land, Native American women have never been compensated for the full value of their labor in the U.S. workforce. Native American women are typically paid only 60 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.¹ This gap in pay typically amounts to a loss of \$2,055 every month or \$24,656 every year, and adds up to \$986,240 over a 40-year career.² This wage gap means that Native American women have to work 21 months – until October 1 – to make as much as white, non-Hispanic men were paid in the previous calendar year alone.

Native American women are on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis; nearly three in ten Native American women (29 percent) work in a front-line job.³ As a result, they are disproportionately affected by the pandemic's health and economic impacts. The pandemic has exposed how the work performed primarily by women has long been and continues to be undervalued, even as the rest of the country is depending on it as never before. Women are the majority of workers risking their lives to provide health care, child care, and other essential services, and Native American women are overrepresented in a variety of these occupations. They are also overrepresented in many of the occupations feeling the brunt of COVID-related job loss. Lost earnings due to the gender wage gap are exacerbating the effects of COVID-19 for Native American women – and for the families who depend on their income—leaving them without a financial cushion to weather this crisis.

Nearly three in ten Native American women work in a front-line job, but they are being paid less than their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts in those jobs and are experiencing high unemployment.

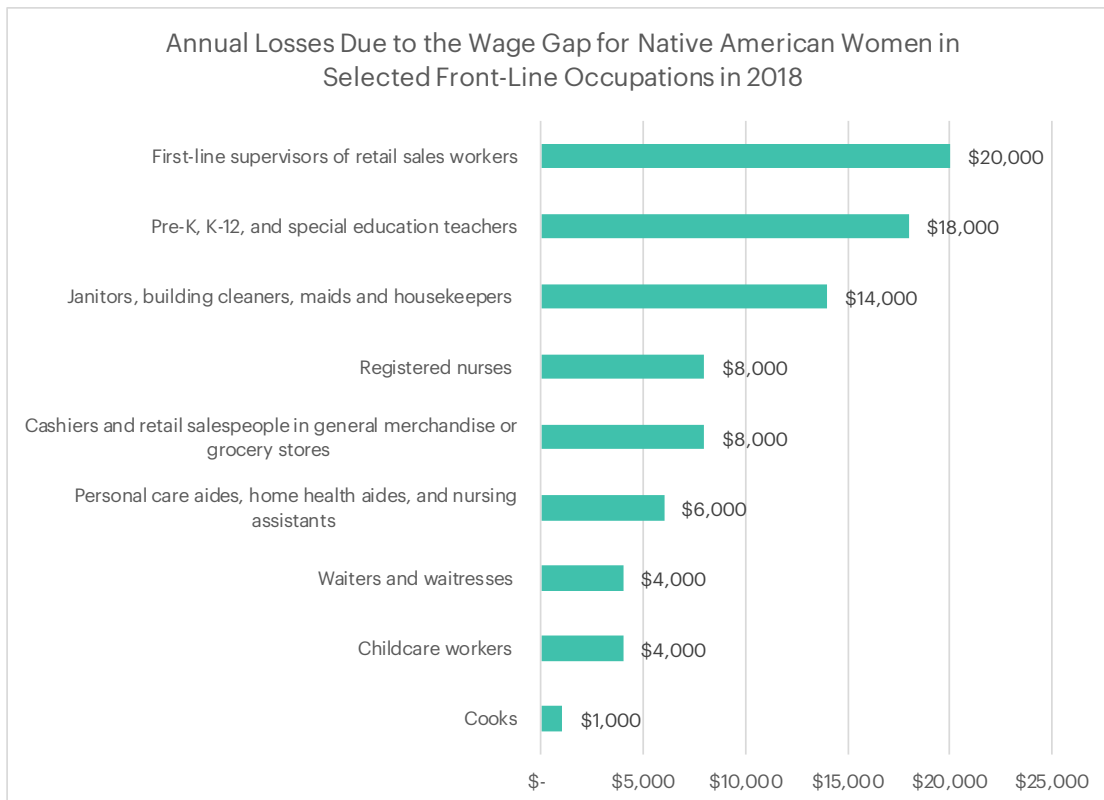
Native American women are overrepresented in front-line jobs providing essential services to the public during COVID-19, making up 0.5 percent of the front-line workforce, despite making up only 0.3 percent of the overall workforce.⁴ But Native American women are still paid less than white, non-Hispanic men in the same jobs. For example, Native American women working full-time, year-round as personal care aides, home health aides, and nursing assistants make just 80 cents for every dollar typically paid to white, non-Hispanic men in the same roles. Similarly, Native American women working full-time, year-round as teachers typically make just 68 cents for every dollar white, non-Hispanic male teachers typically make.

THE WAGE GAP FOR NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN IN SELECTED FRONT-LINE OCCUPATIONS

Occupation	Percent of workers who are Native American women	Median hourly wage for Native American women in occupation	Median hourly wage for white, non-Hispanic men in occupation	What a Native American woman makes for every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man makes
Personal care aides, home health aides, and nursing assistants	0.9%	\$11.54	\$14.42	\$0.80
Cashiers and retail salespeople in general merchandise or grocery stores	0.8%	\$9.62	\$13.46	\$0.71
Janitors, building cleaners, maids and housekeepers	0.7%	\$10.10	\$16.83	\$0.60
Childcare workers	0.7%	\$10.10	\$12.02	\$0.84
Waiters and waitresses	0.6%	\$11.54	\$13.46	\$0.86
Cooks	0.5%	\$10.58	\$11.06	\$0.96
First-line supervisors of retail sales workers	0.4%	\$14.42	\$24.04	\$0.60
Pre-K, K-12, and special education teachers	0.4%	\$18.75	\$27.40	\$0.68
Registered nurses	0.4%	\$29.81	\$33.65	\$0.89

Source: NWLC calculations based on 2018 American Community Survey using IPUMS. Figures are in 2018 dollars. Median hourly wages are for full-time, year-round workers. Hourly wages are derived by dividing median annual earnings by 2,080 hours, which assumes a 40-hour work week for 52 weeks.

This difference in wages results in an annual loss that left many Native American women and their families struggling to make ends meet even before the current economic crisis.⁵ For example, Native American women in a low-paid front-line occupation such as waiters and waitresses typically lost \$4,000 due to the wage gap in 2018. Native American women working as supervisors of retail sales workers typically lost a staggering \$20,000 due to the wage gap in 2018.



These wage gaps leave Native American women less able than their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts to successfully weather COVID-related income loss. And many Native American women are experiencing just such income loss: though data are not available broken down by sex, more than 1 in 4 Native American workers (26.3 percent) was unemployed in April 2020, the month with the largest job losses and highest rates of unemployment.⁶ In addition, more than half of the jobs that have returned in recent months are in the leisure and hospitality and retail sectors (54.7%)—these are the very jobs that are at risk of being lost all over again if states need to reimpose lockdowns or if COVID-19 leads to low or no demand.⁷

If we don't close the wage gap, Native American women stand to lose nearly one million dollars over the course of a 40-year career.

A loss of forty-three cents on the dollar adds up over a month, a year, and a lifetime, especially for Native American women, more than one in five of whom live below the poverty line.⁸ If today's median wage gap does not close, Native American women stand to lose \$2,055 each month, \$24,656 a year, and a staggering \$986,240 over the course of a 40-year career. Assuming a Native American woman and her white, non-Hispanic male counterpart both begin work at age 20, the wage gap means a Native American woman would have to work until she is 87 years old to be paid what a white, non-Hispanic man has been paid by age 60.⁹

In seventeen states Native American women's typical lifetime losses exceed the national figure of \$986,240: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Utah, and Washington. Native American women would have to work decades past retirement age – and in some cases to age 100 and beyond – in order to make up these lifetime losses.¹⁰

Some communities of Native American women experience substantially wider wage gaps.¹¹

Depending on tribe, some Native American women experience an even larger gap than is reflected in the 60-cent number for Native American women overall.

- Yaqui women experience the largest wage gap and typically make less than half – 46.4 percent – of what white, non-Hispanic men make. Apache, Blackfoot, and Navajo women all typically make 49.7 percent of what white, non-Hispanic men make.
- Additionally, Chickasaw, Chippewa, Choctaw, Iroquois, Lumbee, Pueblo, and Sioux women all are typically paid less than 60 percent of what white, non-Hispanic men make. No Native American women community typically makes more than 83 cents for every dollar made by white, non-Hispanic men.
- In a few tribes, Native American women are typically paid more than their Native American male counterparts, but even in these tribes, Native American women are typically paid significantly less than white, non-Hispanic men.

NATIVE WOMEN’S WAGE EQUALITY BY TRIBE

Tribe	Native American women’s earnings	Native American women’s earnings/ White, non-Hispanic men’s earnings	Native American women’s earnings/ Native American men’s earnings (within tribes)
Apache	\$30,000	49.7%	72.1%
Blackfoot	\$30,000	49.7%	60.0%
Cherokee	\$37,000	61.3%	77.1%
Chickasaw	\$32,000	53.0%	71.1%
Chippewa	\$34,000	56.3%	79.1%
Choctaw	\$35,000	58.0%	79.5%
Creek	\$38,500	63.8%	74.0%
Eskimo	\$49,900	82.7%	124.8%
Iroquois	\$35,000	58.0%	85.4%
Lumbee	\$35,000	58.0%	87.5%
Navajo	\$30,000	49.7%	83.3%
Potawatomie	\$50,000	82.9%	90.9%
Pueblo	\$34,000	56.3%	105.6%
Puget Sound Salish	\$46,000	76.2%	131.4%
Sioux	\$31,500	52.2%	87.5%
Yaqui	\$28,000	46.4%	77.8%

Native American women’s and men’s earnings are based on 2018 American Community Survey 1-year sample using IPUMS-USA available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>. White, non-Hispanic men’s earnings are 2018 American Community Survey 1-year sample, Table B20017H, available at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>. The typical white, non-Hispanic man made \$60,350 in 2018. Figures are based on women’s and men’s median earnings for full-time, year-round workers. Figures are not adjusted for inflation. Earnings are in 2018 dollars.

Because these amounts add up, unequal pay means that Native American women have less money in their pocket right now, and it also means they miss key opportunities throughout their lifetimes to build wealth and future economic security for themselves and their families. The wage gap means many can’t save enough to afford a down payment on a home, can’t afford to pay for their own higher education or their child’s, can’t start a business or save for retirement.

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Losses due to gender and racial wage gaps are devastating for Native American women and their families, an alarming number of whom were struggling to make ends meet even before the current crisis. This pandemic threatens to deepen these inequities. Native American women have been shortchanged and their work has been undervalued for far too long; neither they nor their families can afford to wait for change during an unprecedented public health and economic crisis that has no end in sight.

- 1 NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey [hereinafter 2019 ACS], tables B20017C and B20017H. Figures are for full-time, year-round workers. Men and women self-identify their sex and race/ethnicity in the ACS. Native American women self-identified themselves as Native American or Native Alaskan. White, non-Hispanic men self-identified as white and specified that they were not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Wage gap figures are calculated by taking the median earnings of women and men working full-time, year-round. Median earnings describe the earnings of a worker at the 50th percentile – right in the middle.
- 2 NWLC calculations based on 2019 ACS, tables B20017C and B20017H. Figure assumes a wage gap of \$24,656—the gap in median earnings between full-time, year-round working Native American women (\$36,577) and white, non-Hispanic men (\$61,233) in 2019—each year for 40 years. Figures are not adjusted for inflation.
- 3 NWLC calculations based on 2014-2018 American Community Survey (ACS), 5-year estimates, using IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. “Front-line workforce” is defined using the methodology outlined in Hye Jin Rho, Hayley Brown, & Shawn Fremstad, Center on Economic and Policy Research, A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries (Apr. 2020), available at <https://cepr.net/a-basic-demographic-profile-of-workers-in-frontline-industries/>.
- 4 *Id.*
- 5 Jasmine Tucker and Julie Vogtman, NWLC, When Hard Work is Not Enough: Women in Low-Paid Jobs (Apr. 2020), available at <https://nwlc.org/resources/when-hard-work-is-not-enough-women-in-low-paid-jobs/>.
- 6 Donna Feir and Charles Golding, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Native Employment During COVID-19: Hit Hard in April but Starting to Rebound? (Aug. 2020), available at <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2020/native-employment-during-covid-19-hit-hard-in-april-but-starting-to-rebound>. Note the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor does not publish monthly figures on Native American workers. This analysis reports unemployment rates for all workers ages 25-54 by race; sample sizes do not permit an analysis of workers by sex.
- 7 Claire Ewing-Nelson, NWLC, Jobs Gains Continued to Slow in August, and Women Are Still Short Over 6 Million Jobs Since the Start of the Pandemic (Sept. 2020), available at <https://nwlc.org/resources/august-jobs-report/>.
- 8 Amanda Fins, NWLC, National Snapshot: Poverty among Women & Families, 2019 (Oct. 2019), available at <https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PovertySnapshot2019-2.pdf>.
- 9 This assumes workers begin work at age 20 and work for 40 years, retiring at age 60. In order to make up the more than \$1 million lost to the wage gap, Native American women would need to work 30 more years in order to catch up.
- 10 NWLC, The Lifetime Wage Gap by State for Native Women (Mar. 2020), available at <https://nwlc.org/resources/the-lifetime-wage-gap-by-state-for-native-women/>.
- 11 NWLC calculations based on 2018 ACS 1-year sample Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020, available at <https://ipums.org/>.