NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER

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Native American Women Need Action That Closes the Wage Gap

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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. Among full-time, year-round workers, 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. If this gap isn't closed, a Native American woman starting her career today stands to lose $986,240 over a 40-year career.[2] This wage gap means that Native American women have to work over 20 months – until September 8 – to make as much as white, non-Hispanic men were paid in 12.

Timely data on Native American women and their families can be difficult to come by. In some government data sources, such as the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, which reports key indicators such as unemployment rates and labor force participation on a monthly basis, numbers for Native American people aren't reported at all, let alone by gender. In others, such as the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, which is designed to provide more real time data on the hardship people are experiencing during the pandemic, Native American people are lumped into an "other race" category that completely erases them.

The data we do have paints a bleak picture. Native American women and their families were struggling to make ends meet before the pandemic ever started: 18% of Native American women and 21% of Native American children lived in poverty in 2019.[3] The race and gender wage gap deepened the hardship Native American women and their families were facing, robbing many of adequate income and savings to successfully weather the COVID-19 recession and its aftermath.

The wage gap will typically cost a Native American woman nearly $1 million over a lifetime of work.

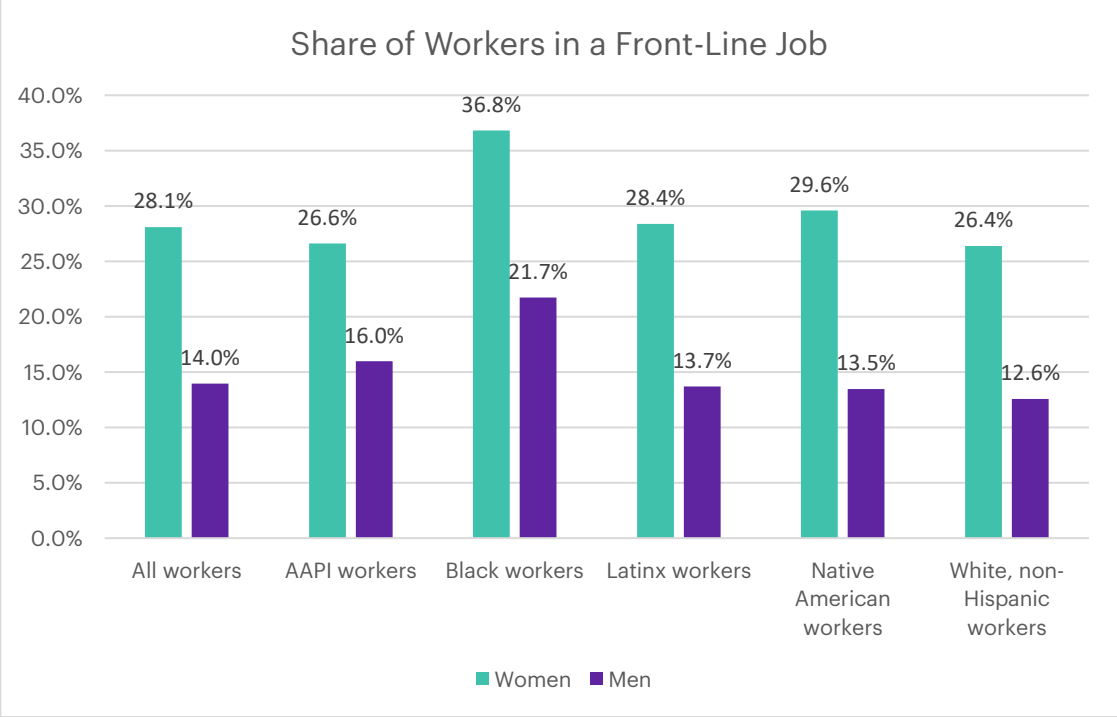
A loss of forty cents on the dollar adds up over a month, a year, and a lifetime. Native American women are typically losing $2,055 each month or $24,656 each year. This annual wage gap could have paid for eight months of child care, five months of food, *and* one year of rent.[4] It could have been a lifeline for Native American women and their families during the pandemic.

If today's median wage gap does not close, a Native American woman stands to lose 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 catch up to what a white, non-Hispanic man was paid by age 60.[5]

Unequal pay means Native American women have less money to cover their current expenses at a moment when every penny counts. It also has ripple effects that mean Native American women miss key opportunities throughout their lifetimes to build wealth and future economic security for themselves and their families. The wage gap means many cannot save enough to afford a down payment on a home, cannot afford to pay for their own or a child's higher education, cannot start a business or save for retirement. Unfortunately, data on the wealth gap for Native Americans is not measured systematically or consistently. However, the most recent data from 2000 shows that Native American households have only 8.7 cents of wealth for every dollar in wealth households have overall.[6]

Nearly three in ten Native American women work in a front-line job, but they are being paid less than white, non-Hispanic men.

As workers, Native American women have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis, and as a result have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic's health and economic impacts. Native American women are the second most likely group by race/ethnicity and gender to have been on the front lines of the pandemic: nearly three in ten Native American women (29.6%) worked in a front-line job before the pandemic started.[7]



Source: NWLC calculations based on 2015-2019 American Community Survey (ACS), 5-year estimates, using IPUMS-USA. "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 Front-line Industries (Apr. 2020).

This means that as we have relied on their labor as never before, Native American women on the front lines of this crisis have been undervalued and underpaid. Native American women working full-time, year-round in front-line occupations make just 62 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men in the same jobs.[8] The wage gap varies widely by front-line occupation. For example, Native American women working full time, year-round as personal care aides, home health aides, and nursing assistants make 87 cents for every dollar white, non-Hispanic men make in these jobs, which adds up to a typical annual loss of $3,700. Meanwhile, Native American women working full time, year-round as janitors, building cleaners, maids and housekeepers make 61 cents for every dollar white, non-Hispanic men in these jobs make; their typical annual losses to the wage gap total nearly $14,000.[9] 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.[10]

These wage gaps leave Native American women less able than their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts to successfully weather COVID-related income loss. While unemployment data for Native American women is unavailable, data shows that Native American workers were more likely than workers overall to be unemployed before the current crisis, a trend that remains true during the pandemic. In June 2021 the unemployment rate for Native American workers (8.5%) was nearly 1.5 times higher than the unemployment rate for workers overall (5.8%).[11] And recent trends in where jobs have been added to the economy may be cause for concern: the economy shed over 22.3 million jobs between February and April 2020, about 75% of which have been recovered. But nearly 2 in 5 of the jobs that have been added back to the economy (38.9%) between April 2020 and July 2021 have been in the leisure and hospitality sector.[12] With the Delta variant forcing many businesses to reimpose restrictions, and many children not yet vaccinated, these jobs could be at risk of being lost again if the pandemic leads to low demand for those services or parents are unable to send children back to in person learning.

COVID-19 has imposed economic harm on Native American mothers, who were already facing a higher risk of poverty and steeper wage gap than Native American women overall.

As our nation's already unstable care infrastructure broke down in March 2020, many working mothers were unable to manage caregiving for children and other family members, remote learning, and other new responsibilities responding to the COVID crisis on top of their jobs. These impossible pressures, combined with massive job losses, have pushed many mothers out of the labor force entirely.[13]

But even before COVID-19 hit, Native American mothers were paid just 50 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic fathers,[14] while nearly 3 in 4 Native American mothers were primary breadwinners or co-breadwinners for their families.[15] Even when they were working full time, Native American mothers were over five times more likely than white, non-Hispanic fathers working full time to be living below the poverty line in 2019 (13.3% versus 2.6%). And nearly two in five Native American mothers working full time (38.8%) were living below twice the poverty line.[16]

Some communities of Native American women experience substantially wider wage gaps.[17]

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.

NATIVE AMERICAN 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)
Alaskan Althabaskan	$38,848	64.7%	109.0%
Aleut	$52,876	88.1%	132.2%
Apache	$33,374	55.6%	91.5%
Blackfoot	$31,288	52.1%	76.8%
Cherokee	$36,690	61.2%	80.1%
Chickasaw	$36,800	61.3%	73.6%
Chippewa	$36,222	60.4%	85.0%
Choctaw	$36,503	60.8%	77.8%
Creek	$37,769	62.9%	88.3%
Iñupiat	$47,852	79.8%	110.9%
Iroquois	$35,000	58.3%	79.0%
Lumbee	$33,452	55.8%	83.3%
Navajo	$32,200	53.7%	87.9%
Pima	$33,000	55.0%	94.3%
Potawatomi	$42,615	71.0%	104.6%
Pueblo	$31,961	53.3%	89.7%
Puget Sound Salish	$43,164	71.9%	97.6%
Sioux	$31,961	53.3%	89.7%
Yaqui	$32,049	53.4%	83.9%
Yup'ik	$37,546	62.6%	84.2%

All earnings are based on 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-year sample using IPUMS-USA available at https://usa.ipums.org/usa/. White, non-Hispanic men typically made $60,000 between 2015-2019. Figures are based on women's and men's median earnings for full-time, year-round workers. Figures are not adjusted for inflation.

- Blackfoot women experience the largest wage gap and are paid just 52 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.
- Pueblo, Sioux, and Yaqui women typically make just 53 cents of what white, non-Hispanic men make.
- 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 substantially less than white, non-Hispanic men. No Native American women community typically makes more than 88 cents for every dollar made by white, non-Hispanic men.

Native American women need action that closes the wage gap.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, Native American women were losing tens of thousands of dollars annually due to the wage gap and many were struggling to make ends meet. And while the lack of sufficient data means that little is known about what happened to Native American women's jobs during the pandemic, it is likely that many Native American women have continued to work in front-line jobs while caring for children through school and child care closures and managing other caregiving responsibilities. Many others have likely lost their jobs entirely. This impossible situation threatens to devastate Native American women's careers and long-term earning potential. As Native American women who lost jobs or left the labor force return to work, they may find themselves with no choice other than to take jobs that are lower-paying or lower-quality than the ones they left. The cost of education and training that would allow them to advance or transition to a career in a different field will be out of reach for many Native American women as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic.

These far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 crisis may reverberate for years to come and exacerbate pre-existing racial and gender wage gaps. The data we have makes one thing abundantly clear: Native American have been shortchanged and undervalued for far too long. They need action that closes the wage gap. We need to: bolster equal pay laws; increase the wages of women in low-paid jobs by raising the minimum wage; protect workers' ability to join unions and collectively bargain; expand the availability of high-quality, affordable child care; and provide paid family and medical leave.[18] We must also collect better and more data on Native American women and their families to get a more complete picture of their current experiences during the pandemic. Without this critical data, Native women will remain invisible and forgotten—and potentially left behind in this recovery.

1 NWLC calculations using 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 American Indian or Alaskan Native. 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 Amanda Fins, "National Snapshot: Poverty Among Women and Families, 2020," (National Women's Law Center, Dec. 2020), https://nwlc.org/resources/national-snapshotpoverty-among-women-families-2020/.

4 NWLC calculations using 2019 ACS; Child Care Aware of America, The US and the High Cost of Child Care 2020 Report Appendices, https://www.childcareaware.org/our-issues/research/the-us-and-the-high-price-of-child-care-2019/; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA Food Plans: Cost of Food Report for May 2021, using low-cost food plan for a family of 4, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cnpp/usda-food-plans-cost-food-reports-monthly-reports; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey, Table B25064, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=B25064%3A%20MEDIAN%20GROSS%20RENT%20%20%28DOLLARS%29&tid=ACSDT1Y2019.B25064.

5 This assumes workers begin work at age 20 and work for 40 years, retiring at age 60. In order to make up the nearly $1 million lost to the wage gap, Native American women would need to work 27 more years in order to catch up.

6 Mariko Chang and Meizhu Lui, "Lifting as We Climb: Women of Color, Wealth, and America's Future," Insight Center for Community Economic Development, (2010), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c50b84131d4df5265e7392d/t/5c5c7801ec212d4fd499ba39/1549563907681/Lifting_As_We_Climb_InsightCCED_2010.pdf.

7 NWLC calculations using 2015-2019 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), https://cepr.net/a-basic-demographic-profile-of-workers-in-frontline-industries/.

8 NWLC calculations using 2019 ACS, accessed through Ruggles et al., IPUMS USA.

9 NWLC calculations using 2019 ACS, accessed through Ruggles et al., IPUMS USA.

10 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/.

11 Native American Labor Market Dashboard, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis (July 2021), https://www.minneapolisfed.org/indiancountry/resources/native-american-labor-market-dashboard. Figures are three-month rolling averages.

12 National Women's Law Center (NWLC) calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "Employees on Nonfarm Payrolls by Industry Sector and Selected Industry Detail," Table B-1 in July 2021 Employment Situation Summary (Washington, DC: August 6, 2021), https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t17.htm. Historical data available at https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm. Figures are seasonally adjusted.

13 Claire Ewing-Nelson, Even Before This Disastrous Year for Mothers, They Were Still Only Paid 75 Cents for Every Dollar Paid to Fathers, (National Women's Law Center, May 2021), https://nwlc.org/resources/wp-content-uploads-2020-05-moms-epd-2020-v2-pdf/.

14 Claire Ewing-Nelson, Even Before This Disastrous Year for Mothers, They Were Still Only Paid 75 Cents for Every Dollar Paid to Fathers, (National Women's Law Center, May 2021), https://nwlc.org/resources/wp-content-uploads-2020-05-moms-epd-2020-v2-pdf/.

15 Sarah Jane Glynn, Breadwinning Mothers Are Critical to Families' Economic Security, (Center for American Progress, Mar. 2021), https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/news/2021/03/29/497658/breadwinning-mothers-critical-familys-economic-security/.

16 NWLC calculations using 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), accessed through Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series USA (IPUMS USA): Version 11.0 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2021), https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V11.0.

17 NWLC calculations using 2015-2019 ACS, accessed through Ruggles et al., IPUMS USA.

18 "The Wage Gap: The Who, How, Why, and What To Do" (National Women's Law Center, Oct. 2020), https://nwlc.org/resources/the-wage-gap-the-who-how-why-and-whatto-do/.