



A Wage Justice Agenda for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Women

2026 NHPI Equal Pay Day

By Seher Khawaja, National Economic Justice Director, Equal Rights Advocates

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CLOSER LOOK:

Equal Pay Today's Platform for Change

Equal Pay Today, a project of Equal Rights Advocates, is a wage justice initiative uniting over 50 national, regional, state, and tribal organizations to eradicate pay disparities harming women and other workers based on characteristics including gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQ status, and disability. With a focus on low-paid workers and communities of color, Equal Pay Today is building a wage justice movement for all through policy advocacy, movement building, research, and strategic legal enforcement. Equal Pay Today's comprehensive [Policy Agenda](#) addresses various contributors to the gap, including pay inequity and pay secrecy, lack of caregiver supports and caregiver bias, occupational segregation, poverty wages, and workplace discrimination. Since its founding, Equal Pay Today has supported successful pay equity legislation in 44 states, helped lead advocacy in support of successful federal actions, and built upon these wins during the most recent legislative sessions across the country.

The State of Wage Justice for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Women

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) women come from diverse demographic groups with unique cultural and economic experiences that are often distorted or misunderstood because available analysis typically groups them in broader demographic categories. As a result, NHPI women are often left out of wage gap conversations. NHPI women deserve to be seen, to be counted, and to have access to equal economic opportunity, which starts with full recognition of their distinct identities.

Based on available data, NHPI women working full-time, year-round, are paid only 67 cents for every dollar paid to white men.¹ This figure drops to 59 cents when taking into account all NHPI working women, including full-time, part-time, and part-year (seasonal) workers.² Yet, even these figures don't tell the full story. Because current data collections generally combine all AANHPI people, they obscure true disparities for NHPI women who face distinct barriers to economic security.

With over 1.6 million NHPI individuals living across the United States, NHPI women represent at least 31 distinct cultural groups, including Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Chamorros, Tongans, Fijians, and Marshallese.³ The data shows that labor market experiences can vary significantly based on ethnic group. A closer look at available disaggregated data starts to reveal more complex disparities and even steeper gaps for certain communities, with some Pacific Islander women earning as little as 43 cents on the dollar.⁴

NHPI women are subject to one of the largest wage gaps in the country based on intersecting factors, including gender, race, and ethnicity. These gaps stem from colonial legacies that have resulted in structural discrimination that leave many NHPI women fighting for economic survival in the face of unique barriers.

- NHPI women disproportionately work in essential low-wage service occupations, including as cashiers, waitresses, sales workers, personal care aides, nurses and home health aides, customer service representatives and social workers.⁵ Wages in these industries are typically too low to meet the average cost of living across the U.S.

¹ National Women's Law Center, *The Wage Gap by State for Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Women* (2025), <https://nwlc.org/resource/wage-gap-state-native-hawaiian-and-other-pacific-islander-women/>.

² *Id.*

³ Empowering Pacific Islander Communities, *A Community of Contrast in the United States*, 11-12 (2025); <https://www.empoweredpi.org/research>; <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rWvS9OG881PumvbfCc6lYyBeSxlpvwRa/view>.

⁴ Institute for Women's Policy Research & National Asian and Pacific American Women's Forum, AANHPI Women's Equal Pay Day: Fact vs. Fiction About the Wage Gap (Apr. 2026), https://napawf.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/aanhpi-equal-pay-fact-vs-fiction-napawf-iwpr.pdf?utm_source=ig&utm_medium=social&utm_content=link_in_bio&fbclid=PAAdGRleAUN8UJwZG9mA mZkaWQWUOEqiFMd7v7p4D0c7I5QXgy537PzE2V4dG4DYWVtAjExAHNy dGMGYXBwX2lkDzEyNDAYNDU3NDI4NzQxNAABp7HqVSD4XVw9oSO4Bmbce3wCGaHKwKIW9UmWaejYGfHWYRQoWT2KVK4LaB-aem_WOZMWjZjN8wfPYvsaOTbnQ.

⁵ Mimla Wardak, Sydelle Barreto, Natali Baker, *5 Facts About the Labor Market Experiences of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Women*, Center for American Progress (Apr. 7, 2025), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/5-facts-about-the-labor-market-experiences-of-asian-american-native-hawaiian-and-pacific-islander-women/>.

- NHPI women face significant barriers to educational attainment with around 20 percent holding a bachelor's degree or higher.⁶ Despite gains in educational attainment, NHPI communities continue to face significant economic hardship and challenges in meeting the cost of living day to day.⁷
- NHPI individuals earn lower per capita incomes compared to national averages, and many NHPI families live in multigenerational and multi-family homes where they rely on the incomes of several family members to try to make ends meet.⁸
- 14 percent of NHPI individuals live below the federal poverty line and one-third are considered low-income.⁹
- NHPI women face higher rates of unemployment, which further undermines their financial security and long-term stability and independence.¹⁰
- NHPI women often serve as caregivers for children and aging family members.¹¹
- NHPI women face significant gaps in parental leave coverage. For example, the state of Hawai'i, which has the highest proportion of NHPI women in the U.S., currently does not provide paid family leave and 59 percent of families with children in that state are living paycheck to paycheck.¹²

Economic Mobility and the Democratic Process

September 15, 2026 marks NHPI Equal Pay Day and National Voter Registration Day. NHPI communities have one of the lowest voter turnouts across the country with only 63.3 percent registered to vote.¹³ Civic engagement—through voting, running for office, serving as elected officials, and increasing representation in political leadership—is a critical lever for NHPI women to be heard and to build political power, economic security, and wealth within NHPI communities.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Empowering Pacific Islander Communities, *A Community of Contrast in the United States*, 8 (2025); <https://www.empoweredpi.org/research>; <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rWvS9OG881PumvbfCc6lYyBeSxlpvwRa/view>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Empowering Pacific Islander Communities, *NHPI Women's Equal Pay Day 2026 Toolkit* (Sept. 2026), <https://www.empoweredpi.org/nhpi-equal-payday-2026>.

¹¹ National Asian and Pacific American Women's Forum & Empowering Pacific Islander Communities, *Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Equal Pay Day Briefing* (Sept. 2023), <https://napawf.org/equalpay/nhpi-panel-2023/>.

¹² Hawai'i Children's Action Network, *Why Hawai'i Needs Paid Family Leave*, https://www.hawaii-can.org/paid_family_leave.

¹³ Empowering Pacific Islander Communities, *A Community of Contrast in the United States*, 8 (2025); <https://www.empoweredpi.org/research>; <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rWvS9OG881PumvbfCc6lYyBeSxlpvwRa/view>.

CLOSER LOOK:

The federal administration's attacks on data collection are exacerbating wage injustice for NHPI Women. Despite the need for more disaggregated data to reveal deeper and more complex disparities among ethnic subgroups, the federal government continues to take drastic steps to roll back demographic data collection and undermine efforts to further disaggregate data that is critical to identify discrimination and facilitate anti-discrimination enforcement. These efforts include:

- removing federal datasets at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and other agencies
- issuing a proposed rule to eliminate collection of EEO-1 workforce demographic data vital to anti-discrimination enforcement and awareness-raising;
- contemplating a proposal to limit Census Bureau data collection to exclude broad categories of non-citizens from calculations and prohibiting questions about race and ethnicity;
- eliminating the White House Initiative on Asian American, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (WHIAANHPI);
- disbanding the Federal Equitable Data Working Group and key Census Bureau advisory committees.

A Comprehensive Wage Justice Agenda for NHPI Women

"We see it across generations in our community: a nephew moving in with an aunt for a chance at college, parents moving in with grandparents to make ends meet and help care for them, and mothers going back to work before they're ready because paid leave runs out too soon. Our mothers and grandmothers taught us what it means to care for one another, and we carry that forward — even when the wages aren't enough, and even without health insurance, because it's what keeps our families afloat. This is why EPIC fights for data that reflects the true diversity of our communities, and for leaders who will stand up for NHPI women at the ballot box."

SINA UIPI, DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL POLICY AND ADVOCACY, EMPOWERING PACIFIC ISLANDER COMMUNITIES (EPIC)

The persistent and sizable pay gap for NHPI women is not a coincidence. The gap is the result of colonial legacies and discriminatory structures that have rendered NHPI women invisible, excluded them from opportunities to build economic security and wealth, and segregated them into lower wage occupations.

These gross injustices are solvable. Over the past decade, Equal Pay Today has built community power behind policy reforms that address the key contributors to the pay gap harming NHPI women. These solutions, set forth in our [Policy Agenda](#), not only defend against a hostile federal administration; they are paving a new vision for valuing the labor of NHPI and other women.

This playbook of legislative solutions can and should be replicated across states towards the goal of building long-term consensus to codify these protections in federal legislation.

A comprehensive wage justice agenda for NHPI women includes:

- **Confronting systemic discrimination barring many NHPI women from accessing equal opportunity.** Centering the voices and leadership of NHPI women, the EPT Policy Agenda works to preserve and advance key tools to address systemic discrimination. This includes: opposing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC's) attempt to eliminate the longstanding EEO-1 data collection and strengthening state protections to codify disparate impact liability. Disparate impact protections allow employees to challenge workplace practices that appear neutral on their face, but result in biased outcomes for women, people of color, and other protected groups.
- **Tackling job segregation into low-wage industries.** NHPI women face high rates of occupational segregation that has pushed them into essential yet undervalued occupations that severely limit their earnings and prevent them from achieving basic economic security. The EPT Policy Agenda sets forth a roadmap to raise wages in underpaid and undervalued industries where women and workers of color are disproportionately represented. This includes: fighting to preserve federal data collections that are critical for identifying trends in occupational segregation and advocating for the [Fair Pay Act](#), a federal bill that would require employers to provide equal pay to employees for comparable or equivalent work helping to address wage differentials due to occupational segregation. Equally important is the creation of pathways for NHPI women to enter male-dominated higher paying industries with union protections through initiatives like Equal Rights Advocate's Infrastructure Pathways Project and the advocacy of the National Taskforce on Tradeswomen's Issues, a project of ERA.
- **Promoting equal pay by strengthening pay equity laws, implementing salary history bans, and prohibiting retaliation.** NHPI women face discrimination based on intersecting factors that drive hiring biases and unequal treatment on the job. These dynamics limit advancement, thwart mobility, and bring down wages. To address these inequities, Equal Pay Today advocates for state and federal legislation to close loopholes in existing pay equity laws, mandate equal pay for equal or substantially similar work, and prohibit the use of prior salary in hiring and salary-

setting. This includes ongoing advocacy to enact the [Paycheck Fairness Act](#) and support that has resulted in dozens of pay equity legislative wins at the state level.

- **Demanding pay transparency to empower workers with leverage and hold employers accountable.** Secrecy around pay prevents NHPI women from identifying gender or race-based wage disparities and advocating for fair pay. When pay practices remain secret, employers can maintain discriminatory practices absent scrutiny. Equal Pay Today supports passage of the federal [Salary Transparency Act](#) and leads efforts to support states to enact pay transparency laws. In 2024, Hawaii’s pay transparency law went into effect, requiring private employers with 50 or more employees to include salary or hourly rates in job listings.
- **Establishing caregiver protections and reducing caregiver penalties.**

“The wage disparities faced by NHPI women are often partially due to cultural expectations around caregiving. Shouldering the responsibility of caring for children, elders, and other family members can limit NHPI women’s work hours, interrupt their careers, or result in a reliance on flexible but lower-paying jobs. Achieving economic justice for NHPI women therefore requires more than just closing the wage gap; it means valuing caregiving as vital work and investing in policies that allow NHPI women to care for their families without sacrificing economic stability.”

**SYDELLE BARRETO, POLICY
MANAGER, NATIONAL ASIAN PACIFIC
AMERICAN WOMEN’S FORUM**

NHPI women are disproportionately tasked with unpaid caregiving responsibilities that can cause workplace interruptions that result in women receiving less pay, being denied promotions, and facing barriers to advancement in their careers. Wage justice requires caregiver protections, including affordable childcare, paid family leave, and paid time off. Equal Pay Today supports efforts to enact the federal [FAMILY Act](#) to establish paid family and medical leave benefits; the [Healthy Families Act](#), to establish paid sick leave; and the [Job Protection Act](#) and the [Caring for All Families Act](#) to expand existing leave protections nationwide. Equal Pay Today also supports state legislative efforts to achieve these protections.

- **Raising the wage floor, eliminating poverty-wages, and challenging wage theft.**

NHPI families face high poverty rates, and many NHPI women are more likely to earn poverty wages. Wage justice cannot be achieved without addressing the inequities created by job segregation and its role in driving the wage gap without increasing the wage floor. Equal Pay Today supports the federal and state legislation to increase the minimum wage, eliminate the tipped minimum wage, and preserve and expand funding for public benefits.

- **Strengthening enforcement and challenging attacks on enforcement infrastructure.**

Equal Pay Today strongly opposes the gutting of our nation's civil rights enforcement agencies and other critical programs and engages in robust federal defensive work to stem the current administration's attempts to dismantle existing public benefits, civil rights and labor protections, and enforcement. This includes advocacy to safeguard and restore federal enforcement agencies like the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), to preserve critical data collections carried out by the EEOC and the U.S. Census Bureau, and to oppose the rescission of critical guidance and federal regulations clarifying enforcement of core civil rights workplace protections.

Spotlight on Partners and Efforts to Improve Demographic Data Collection: Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) and the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF)

At a time when the federal government seeks to eliminate demographic data collection, EPIC and NAPAWF are leading the way to raise visibility on the critical role that disaggregated data plays in revealing more complex disparities among our communities and uplifting the voices of NHPI women.

Their collective work has shown how the use of aggregated data that groups Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) together with Asian Americans (AA) masks deeper inequities, whereas the use of disaggregated data reveals significant pay disparities across NHPI communities compared to white, non-Hispanic men.

Recent [analysis from NAPAWF and the Institute for Women's Policy Research](#) shows the following diverse gaps:

- Fijian women: 87¢ for every \$1
- Chamorro and Native Hawaiian women: 67¢ for every \$1
- Samoan women: 63¢ for every \$1
- Other PI women: 43¢ for every \$1

EPIC's recent report, [A Community of Contrast](#), amplifies NHPI stories through disaggregated data across key issue areas and bring visibility to the ways in which colonial legacies resulted in renaming, remapping, regrouping of populations based on non-neutral labels that served an imperial agenda and not the interest of indigenous communities.

This critical work serves as a reminder that aggregate labels currently used by federal, state, and local governments treat dozens of diverse communities as a single entity in a way that undermines the ability to assess and address needs of those communities. Highlighting stark disparities among these subgroups demonstrates the urgent need for more accurate, community-specific data to better capture, understand, and address the wage gap.