

The Experiences of Utah Indigenous Women

SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

In the spring of 2022, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project** convened 11 community conversations with women of color in Utah, and this report summarizes what Indigenous women shared at two of these gatherings. Additional information can be found [here](#). This summary of select findings complements this [research snapshot](#).

MOST PRESSING ISSUES

- 1 Education
- 2 Mental health
- 3 Resources
- 4 Inequity

EDUCATION

High teacher turnover: Women who live on or near the Navajo reservation describe high turnover of teachers. Because of this, their children struggle to form bonds and trust with teachers, which diminishes their learning. The women also perceived a disconnect between the district and the community regarding hiring of teachers and administrators. One woman said, "If the principal, staff, and teachers are all on one page, your kid and your staff are going to excel. But if you've got unbalance, you're not going to have harmony in that building."

Culture in the classroom: Before No Child Left Behind, there was greater cultural influence in preschool, which helped children learn and appreciate their culture. In the past, there was more Navajo representation in staff and leadership, which should be reinstated. One attendee said, "Our kids need to see themselves in those important roles, as they have an effect on their lives." Another idea was an immersion program for Navajo students that respects and teaches the culture: "A lot of times, our students are retraumatized in our schools because they are being policed for behaviors that would be normal at home, but not normal in a White educational institution. Not including culture is invalidating their experience and all the

community and historical trauma that they're experiencing daily." Participants described the importance of ensuring the next generation is taught native culture and customs. One stated, "You can do something that nobody else can do, and you're acknowledged for that, and it makes you feel valuable and that you have something to offer."

Cultural importance of education: Education is empowering, especially for women. The youth, as future leaders, need guidance in developing essential skills. Some participants wondered if students continuing to postsecondary education was emphasized enough. Others underscored the importance of cultural history in education. One teacher said, "Am I going to teach them what is culturally expected of me or that Thanksgiving is a day of mourning for the Wampanoag?" Others want to embrace non-westernized instruction approaches.

MENTAL HEALTH

Cultural context: Unaddressed mental health issues may lead to substance abuse and violence. Participants underscored the importance of connecting and using culturally relevant ways to heal. As one explained, "The reason people often use substances is to numb pain, and our pain comes from generational and continuous trauma. Then they seek treatment from

the colonizers, when healing should come from within the community. We should have professionals to help our people." Many counselors treating children do not understand nuances of cultural issues, so Indigenous children often do not receive comprehensive vital care.

Safety issues: Participants describe unsafe living conditions, including no water and electricity, the lack of transportation for necessities, no internet, the prevalence of domestic violence, and sparse law enforcement and community services. Growing up in unsafe conditions can diminish mental health and the ability to learn and thrive.

Starts at home: Parents need training on how to spot mental health issues, and they need to understand how issues at home affect children's life and health. One participant who works with students on or near the reservation said, "A child knows they don't have running water and are sad that they must go to school unshowered or without clean clothes. We see these kids having their best meal at school because there is no food at home. That's where poor mental health starts, and that easily leads to substance abuse." The loss of culture in addition to poverty that some families experience exacerbates mental health issues.



RESOURCES

Underutilized resources: A social worker participant was surprised to learn the extent of resources available to native people—housing, safety, transportation, and water resources—and how underutilized they were. Participants described the need for effective information dissemination and a resource “one-stop-shop” for Indigenous people.

Support effective programs:

Participants described various helpful programs that disappeared when the person who implemented or managed them retired or moved on. Policy- and decision-makers need to ensure these programs remain and, where possible, to increase representation and resources. Further, one woman said, “Our concerns will never be addressed until somebody legitimately represents all of us in a cabinet position.”

INEQUALITY

Perpetuated power imbalance:

Indigenous people living in small towns in San Juan County are concerned about White people who have implicit biases and savior complexes moving in and exploiting native culture for profit. A power imbalance exists as the towns tend to be led by White people, with native people as the workforce and primary customers. Examples of cultural ignorance microaggressions include being told to

do a rain dance when rain dances do not originate with the Navajo tribe. Those in power make little effort to understand the issues the Navajo face, which leads to contempt and the Navajo not receiving the services they need.

Lack of legal redress: When existing power dynamics lead to discrimination, acquiring legal redress is difficult because legal practitioners in more conservative towns may be biased against Indigenous people. One participant was concerned about the effect of lacking legal services on domestic violence, housing and employment discrimination, and divorce proceedings.

Lack of institutional belonging:

Educators hear from students who feel alienated by pressure to “fit into the box” or “to assimilate.” One woman noted, “Unless you feel you belong, unless you’re embedded with and can embrace your culture, it’s going to affect your mental health. It’s going to affect your ability to get a job. That’s going to affect your housing. It’s all one thing, not separate pockets.” Title VI programs help students feel a sense of belonging, so programs that are working should receive more funding. Indigenous women experience tokenism, described as not being listened to, even if they may have a seat at the table. As one woman explained, “They talk about inclusion, but it feels like ‘okay, the door is open, but there’s the back of the room. Be quiet.’ That’s not equity.”

Feeling used: Indigenous people want to be recognized for more than just arts and performances; they want to be given a voice in times other than November. One attendee said, “All we are is free entertainment to them when they need it. We don’t have any other things going on for us, or don’t have any other value as a culture, or as students and teachers. We do other things, too, you know.” Also, the dominant culture does not consult known, strong leaders about pressing issues.

Cultural knowledge of Utahns: Non-native students tend to be uneducated about Indigenous tribes in Utah. Land acknowledgements help, but they reference the past instead of addressing present issues and acknowledging that Indigenous people are still here. One woman said, “Just five years ago, there was not a single history book in the state of Utah that mentioned American Indians past 1900. We’re eliminated; we’re invisible. It has to stop.” Many stories emerged regarding educators’ ignorance regarding Indigenous peoples. Despite recent passage of a law mandating inclusion of ethnically diverse subjects in social studies, no one on the steering committee is designated to represent such diversity. As one attendee observed, “They’re afraid of their own history.”

This group was convened by:

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ACTION ITEMS FROM PARTICIPANTS

- Codify the Office of Indian Affairs director as a member of the Cabinet, as it is in most other states. Also, codify what “meaningful” means in the Executive Order from 2015 for the Governor to have “meaningful consultation with tribes.”
- Create a Navajo school district.
- Create mentorship programs from grade school to post-secondary education to career.
- Fund a platform and outreach program to improve awareness of resources.
- Fund summer programs and recreation centers for reservation children.
- Implement a process that considers effects on Indigenous communities in policy making.
- Incentivize more Indigenous teachers, as well as long-term tenures of all teachers in school districts that border reservations: San Juan, Duchesne, Tooele, and Cache.
- Increase funding for additional Title VI/ Indian Education programs.
- Provide legal services specifically for Indigenous people in Southern Utah.
- Reinstate a welcoming training program for new teachers in San Juan County to help them learn the culture and meet the community.
- Require a native person serve on the state boards of education.
- Support Indigenous people running for elected office and appointments to boards, commissions, and the Governor’s Cabinet.

