

# The Experiences of Pacific Islander Women in Utah

## 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 Pacific Islander (PI) women shared at two of these gatherings. Additional background information and research methods can be found [here](#). This summary of select findings complements this [research snapshot](#).

## MOST PRESSING ISSUES

- 1 Education and career
- 2 Belonging
- 3 Health

### EDUCATION AND CAREER

**Expand horizons:** While there is a cultural emphasis on education, there is also expectation from both inside and outside the culture that PI students will pursue sports during their education. This limits personal expectations and goals since they see themselves only in athletic contexts. As one participant stated, "I didn't know Polynesians could be anything other than football or volleyball players until I met more who were doing everything else." Lack of information can be a barrier to choosing more skilled professions, with participants saying, "Educational leaders talk about keeping students of color on the path, and I come from people who don't even know that path exists. How do we get these kids to know that there are options, starting when they are young? They need somebody they trust who has access to resources."

**Need for representation:** Participants believe that lack of cultural representation and support in school prevents students from dreaming big. As one stated, "The education piece fails from the beginning as they don't see themselves represented in other students, educators, or support

groups. Our children cannot get to the next level because nobody represents them, nobody includes them." Another said, "Our kids don't talk about careers because people don't talk to them about careers. They don't want to take advanced classes because nobody looks like them in those classes. They don't understand the options they have to pay for a good education." As one woman added, "Our children are taught they're not good enough, so my daughter doesn't see herself as part of that advanced group." Yet when the situation is ideal, "It's amazing what people can do when they feel comfortable."

**Cultural skills advantage:** PIs should capitalize on their innate cultural skills, such as bringing people together and valuing the collective over the individual, which benefit many professions. One participant said, "Compassion is in Polynesians' DNA, therefore they are great healthcare workers. Compassion is 90% of the job." Another expanded, "It's against our nature to be cutthroat and competitive, and I encourage everyone to bring their true selves to whatever position they're in. Don't table who you are, your ability to care, or your ability to build bridges, because that's what our culture is. It's about community, the

village, the tribe. It's why I think it's so hard for our kids to assert themselves, and it's hard for us as professionals. Infiltrate, push that culture of love, of Aloha, of caring, of speaking up for youth. Your purpose is to culturize every position you touch in any place that you're in." The untapped leadership potential is vast, another participant stated: "I don't see us in the decision-making process like where budget decisions are made. But we have so much to contribute because we're group thinkers and we want to see the group succeed."

### BELONGING

**Utah needs to maintain the momentum:** Continue unconscious bias training and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Bias is perpetuated generationally; training needs to start early and become embedded. For example, one woman described a recent experience where her professionally in-demand husband showed up for an in-person job interview: after looking at him, the interviewer said the professional position was closed, but that a warehouse position was open. The attendee was surprised that such discrimination still happens: "Is there actual lawful redress? Is there really equal



opportunity here?" Another participant agreed that current laws are ineffective, noting that anti-discrimination suits filed with the Labor Commission seldom go to court.

**Empowerment starts at home:** These women urge their community to let their children dream big and demand more. One woman said, "We have been told we are not allowed to be doctors or lawyers, to be anything other than the heavy lifters, the brute force, the athletes. And our Polynesian community tells us that's what we are supposed to do too. We should teach our kids to say, 'No, I deserve to be here. I'm here because I love to be here, because I'm smart enough, because you need me to be here.'" Another saw the lack of support firsthand: "I have had really good support, but I met other kids who didn't. That was not just a roadblock for them, it was the end of the road for pursuing goals."

**Hire and listen:** PI women want to be invited to the table—and to be heard. One stated, "Hire us, spotlight us, sponsor us, and then listen to us. If the system isn't built equitably, you will never hear me because I will never have the mic." Another dreamed of "being in places where we can see ourselves is very uplifting and empowering, where we are not just the token brown person, but someone who actually has an impact at the table, who's given decision-making power, who's listened to and counseled with."

**Celebrate trailblazers:** Many honored their path-breaking mothers—or themselves—people who stepped into spaces that had lacked representation. One stated, "When you are pioneering an effort for an ethnic group, you have to be the first one. So, let's be the first one." This includes being the first female Polynesian leader at her business school, in ancestry history, starting medical school despite not being believed in, or creating a college-readiness program for high school students. Participants underscored the need for PI women mentors, role models, and mentorship networks.

**Women are effective and ready:** PI women know how to help their community; they need resources and seats at the table to make change. One participant said, "There is fertile ground to employ Polynesians and put them in positions in power at the table. When we talk, we talk with hundreds of people in mind, not just ourselves." Another said, "If you give us the money, we'd know exactly what to do with it. We've had plans for years on how to propel us in education, improved mental health, every aspect. We haven't had the resources because generational wealth isn't a thing." And another simply stated, "We're here, we're ready to get on board, we're ready to start running."

to seek therapy. Suicide is the number one killer of Polynesian youth. Older generations want to help, but the youth may not fully trust them. As one stated, "Mental health could be seen as a deficit to our grandparents and parents, so nothing could ever be admitted." Participants noted that PI men may feel more stigmatized than women and that they need more help. Participants urged their peers to normalize conversations around mental health throughout the community.

**Promote resources:** Older PI's may not know what services are available or how to access them, so younger generations tend to fend for themselves, continuing the cycle, particularly regarding education and health. The PI community was hit hardest during the pandemic, and too many were unaware of the many resources available to help them. One participant noted how the PI community does not often access preventive health care, and many may not be aware of resources available to the uninsured: "It is just so broken." The meetings revealed the reach these women had in their communities, suggesting that if they were to pool their knowledge, awareness of resources would skyrocket.

This group was convened by:

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## HEALTH

**Destigmatize mental health:** The younger generation is much more open about mental health and more likely

## ACTION ITEMS FROM PARTICIPANTS

- Create a mentorship network for PI women.
- Ensure equity and equal opportunity through policy and redress.
- Find the businesses doing DEI well and mirror their approach.
- Fund the PI health providers resource outreach.
- Increase funding for outreach so PI's understand all the resources available to them and develop culturally relevant ways for information to be disseminated.
- Lean on community members to help solve the problems in their community with funding and support.
- Hire more PI's in government administration and leadership.
- Implement programs that target mid-range, first-generation, low socio-economic minorities for college prep in all Utah high schools.