5 Facts About the Labor Market Experiences of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Women

By: Mimla Wardak, Sydelle Barreto, Natalie Baker, and Sara Estep April 7, 2025

Analysis from the Center for American Progress and the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum finds that AANHPI women, who are often immigrants, have a broad range of intersecting identities that make their labor market experiences unique. Breaking down these aggregates helps break down racial stereotypes too.

Introduction

Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) communities are a diverse and growing segment of the U.S. population, yet their labor market experiences are often misrepresented in public discourse. Labor market statistics are often not disaggregated by race or ethnicity or are presented in highly aggregated categories that mask unique disparities and obscure the lived experiences of AANHPI populations.

This column presents original analysis from the Center for American Progress and the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum on the labor market outcomes of AANHPI women. Using averages from the 2019–2023 American Community Survey data,* it highlights five facts that illustrate the varied experiences of AANHPI women across racial and ethnic groups. Many AANHPI women have the greatest wage gaps and are concentrated in low-paid work, and their labor market realities are intertwined with the challenges they may experience as immigrants.

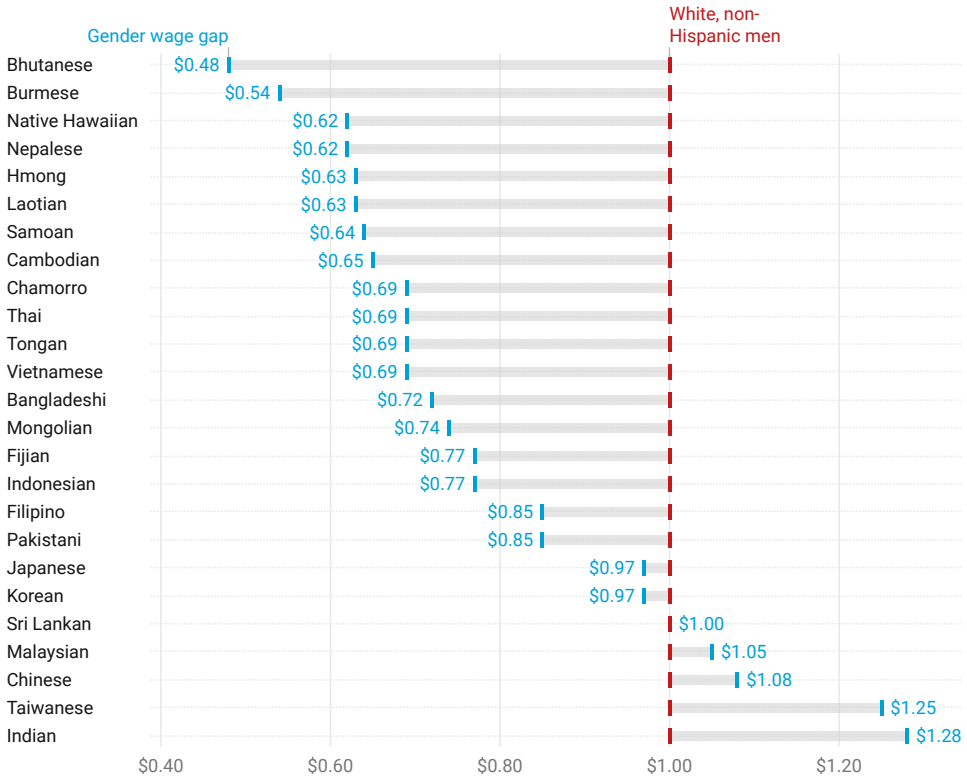
1. Certain groups of AANHPI women face some of the highest wage gaps

Among all workers, the typical AANHPI woman makes 83 cents for every $1 made by white, non-Hispanic men. Yet the population of AANHPI women is far from monolithic. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women have a greater gap, at 61 cents for every $1, and Burmese, Nepalese, and Bangladeshi women make about 54 cents, 62 cents, and 72 cents on the dollar, respectively, compared with white, non-Hispanic men. These disparities may be influenced by intersectional and structural factors including historical immigration patterns, unequal educational opportunities, and potential discrimination in the labor market.

FIGURE 1

There is a substantial gender pay gap for most groups of AANHPI women

Earnings ratio between AANHPI women's median annual earnings and those of white, non-Hispanic men, 2019–2023



Notes: Figures are based on women's and men's median earnings for full-time, year-round workers. Respondents to the American Community Survey self-identify as either male or female and self-identify their race or whether they are of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.

Source: Ashir Coillberg, "Some Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Women Lose $1 Million or More Over a Lifetime to the Racist and Sexist Wage Gap," National Women's Law Center, March 2025.

2. AANHPI women are more likely to be immigrants

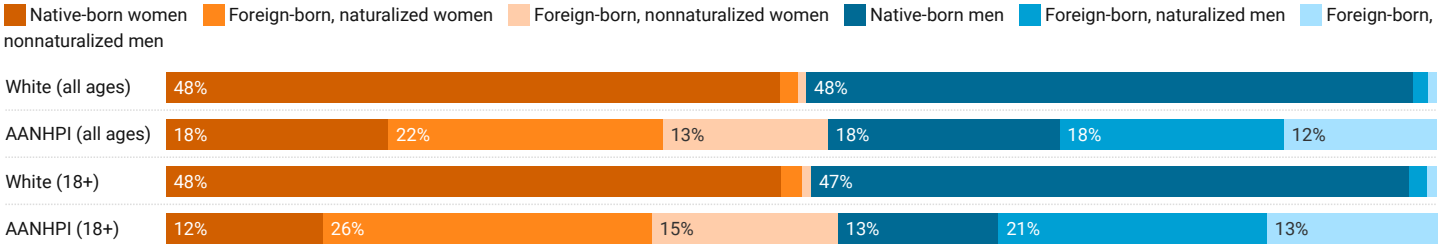
Three-quarters of AANHPI adults living in the United States are immigrants, and more than 45 percent are naturalized citizens. (For the purposes of this analysis, the authors define immigrants as people who are foreign born.) Shares are even higher for AANHPI women: 77 percent of AANHPI American women are immigrants, and 49 percent are naturalized citizens. (see Figure 2a) AANHPI immigrants come from different cultural and economic backgrounds and are more likely to be women than men. (see Figure 2b) This has inherent implications for their labor market outcomes, as AANHPI women are navigating the intersection of being women, people of color, and more often than not, immigrants.

The AANHPI community represents the most rapidly expanding racial demographic in the United States. Asian immigrants are also expected to account for the majority of new immigrants in the coming decades. Projections from the Pew Research Center estimate that the U.S. share of Asian immigrants is projected to increase from 29 percent in 2025 to 38 percent by 2065, surpassing the share of Hispanic immigrants by 2055.

FIGURE 2A

The majority of AANHPI people in the United States are immigrants

Share of native- and foreign-born and naturalized and nonnaturalized people among the white and AANHPI populations, by gender and age, 2019–2023



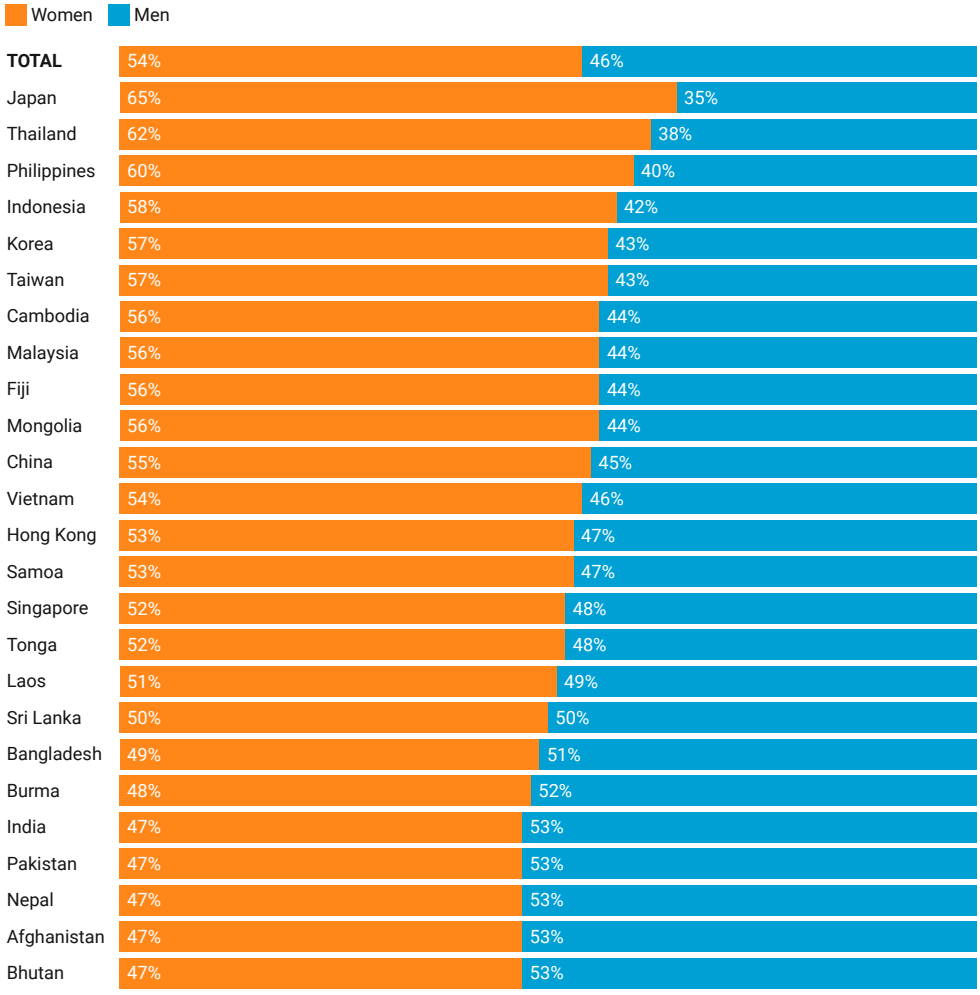
Note: The authors' calculations include non-Hispanic populations only. People from certain countries—including those from Afghanistan, Brunei, the Maldives, and Singapore—are not represented in the IPUMS-coded data due to small or nonexistent sample sizes. Population counts are rounded to the nearest thousand. The foreign-born population includes anyone who is not a U.S. citizen at birth, including those who become U.S. citizens through naturalization. The native-born population includes anyone who is a U.S. citizen at birth, including U.S. citizens born abroad to American parents.

Source: Authors' analysis of Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 15.0, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2024 American Community Survey" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2024).

FIGURE 2B

AANHPI immigrants come from many different countries and are typically more likely to be women

Immigrant population size breakdown, by gender and country of birth, 2019–2023



Notes: Immigrants include both naturalized and nonnaturalized individuals. Due to small sample sizes in the survey data, immigrants from Brunei and the Maldives are excluded. Counts are rounded to the nearest thousand, and totals and percentages rely on underlying data and may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 15.0, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2024 American Community Survey" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2024).

3. AANHPI women have unemployment rates comparable to those of white, non-Hispanic men but disproportionately earn less than $30,000 per year and have lower labor force participation

Earnings

Despite unemployment rates that are comparable to those of white men, more than 1 in 3 working AANHPI women earn $30,000 or less annually—roughly the annual earnings of someone making $17 per hour working full time, year round.** To put this number into perspective, $30,000 per year is less than half the mean annual wage across all occupations for the typical full-time, year-round worker in the United States in 2023. This is particularly pronounced among working Bangladeshi, Burmese, and Mongolian women, among whom more than half earn less than $30,000.

TABLE 1

The labor market experiences of AANHPI women vary significantly by ethnic group

Unemployment rate, share of employed low-wage workers, and labor force participation rate of AANHPI women ages 16 and older, by ethnic group, 2019–2023

Race/ethnicity	Unemployment rate	Share making $30k or less	Labor force participation rate
Bangladeshi	6.5%	52.4%	50.2%
Burmese	3.5%	52.5%	55.9%
Cambodian	5.3%	40.1%	63.6%
Chinese	4.5%	34.3%	59.5%
Indian	4.9%	28.2%	61.3%
Indonesian	4.6%	43.1%	64.4%
Japanese	3.4%	31.6%	47.5%
Korean	4.6%	36.3%	57.2%
Laotian	4.1%	38.8%	67.5%
Malaysian	2.7%	37.8%	65.3%
Mongolian	8.7%	51.9%	67.3%
Nepalese	5.8%	48.7%	63.6%
Pakistani	6.4%	46.0%	50.6%
Filipino	3.6%	31.8%	65.7%
Sri Lankan	5.4%	37.4%	66.8%
Taiwanese	3.0%	24.8%	61.2%
Thai	5.4%	42.6%	59.7%
Vietnamese	4.3%	47.8%	62.8%
Hmong	3.7%	37.7%	69.4%
Native Hawaiian	6.5%	39.6%	58.6%

continues

Race/ ethnicity	Unemployment rate	Share making $30k or less	Labor force participation rate
Fijian	7.0%	34.7%	68.2%
Chamorro	5.4%	37.9%	61.9%
Samoan	7.9%	43.0%	64.6%
Tongan	9.5%	45.6%	66.3%
White men compared with all AANHPI women			
White men	4.3%	27.2%	66.7%
AANHPI women	4.5%	35.3%	60.6%
Asian women	4.4%	35.2%	60.6%
Native Hawaiian women	6.5%	39.6%	58.6%
Pacific Islander women	7.4%	40.8%	64.7%

Note: The authors' calculations include non-Hispanic populations only. The share earning $30,000 or less per year is calculated only for those who are employed. A full-time, year-round worker is a person who worked at least 35 hours per week and at least 50 weeks during the previous calendar year. The proposed $17 per hour minimum wage by Democrats would yield an estimated annual salary of $29,750—rounded to $30,000—providing a clear benchmark for wage classification and analysis. The category of "Other Asian," which includes those not classified under the specific groups shown, is not included in the subpopulation breakouts in this table but is included for calculations of the AANHPI aggregates. Bhutanese women are removed from the subpopulation breakouts in this table due to poor reliability at the 95 percent confidence level; however, they are included for calculations of the AANHPI aggregates.

Source: Authors' analysis of Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 15.0, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2024 American Community Survey" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2024).

Employment

Employment rates among AANHPI women varied by ethnicity from 2019 to 2023. Tongan women had more than double the unemployment rate of white, non-Hispanic men, and for many women of South Asian descent—for example, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women—unemployment rates were about 50 percent higher.

Some groups of AANHPI women have lower unemployment rates than their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts. This may be due to a combination of factors, including the sectors they work in, household structure and child care, immigration status' relationship to employment, levels of education, and work experience. Naturalized-citizen AANHPI women, for example, had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the ACS data—3.7 percent, significantly lower than any other group. During the COVID-19 pandemic, AANHPI women experienced persistent unemployment and greater difficulty being rehired because of their likelihood of having in-person jobs in service roles such as health care and food preparation and serving.

Labor force participation

Many subgroups of AANHPI women also experience greater rates of economic vulnerability, given significant variation in unemployment rates and labor force participation. Many AANHPI women have lower labor force participation than white, non-Hispanic men, though they outperform women's overall participation rate. Hmong women had one of the highest participation rates, at 69.4 percent, while Japanese women had the lowest, at 47.5 percent. (see Table 1)

4. Most AANHPI women work in lower-paid service occupations

Disaggregating occupational data by racial and ethnic subgroups reveals stark disparities. This is because a key driver of the gender pay gap for AANHPI women is occupational segregation, where many AANHPI women work in lower-wage occupations. (see Figure 3)

FIGURE 3

AANHPI women tend to work in lower-wage, service occupations

Top 3 occupations for AANHPI employed women, by ethnic group, and the overall gender wage gap for each top occupation, 2019–2023

← Smaller Larger →

Race/ethnicity	Occupation 1	Occupation 2	Occupation 3
Bangladeshi	Cashiers	Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	Customer service representatives
Burmese	Chefs and cooks	Assemblers and fabricators, n.e.c.	Packers and packagers, hand
Cambodian	Personal appearance workers, n.e.c.	Assemblers and fabricators, n.e.c.	Cashiers
Chinese	Accountants and auditors	Managers, n.e.c.	Software developers, applications and systems software
Indian	Software developers, applications and systems software	Managers, n.e.c.	Registered nurses
Indonesian	Registered nurses	Accountants and auditors	Cashiers
Japanese	Secretaries and administrative assistants	Managers, n.e.c.	Elementary and middle school teachers
Korean	Registered nurses	Managers, n.e.c.	First-line supervisors of sales workers
Laotian	Assemblers and fabricators, n.e.c.	Customer service representatives	Waiters and waitresses
Malaysian	Cashiers	Software developers, applications and systems software	Managers, n.e.c.
Mongolian	Personal appearance workers, n.e.c.	Waiters and waitresses	Accountants and auditors
Nepalese	Registered nurses	Cashiers	Hairdressers, hairstylists, cosmetologists
Pakistani	Physicians and surgeons	Cashiers	Elementary and middle school teachers
Filipino	Registered nurses	Personal care aides	Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides
Sri Lankan	Postsecondary teachers	Teaching assistants	Managers, n.e.c.
Taiwanese	Managers, n.e.c.	Accountants and auditors	Postsecondary teachers
Thai	Chefs and cooks	Waiters and waitresses	Food service and lodging managers
Vietnamese	Personal appearance workers, n.e.c.	Registered nurses	Accountants and auditors
Hmong	Assemblers and fabricators, n.e.c.	Registered nurses	Other production workers
Native Hawaiian	Cashiers	Waiters and waitresses	First-line supervisors of sales workers
Fijian	Personal care aides	Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	Customer service representatives
Chamorro	Customer service representatives	First-line supervisors of sales workers	Secretaries and administrative assistants
Samoan	Personal care aides	Cashiers	First-line supervisors of sales workers
Tongan	Personal care aides	Customer service representatives	Social workers

continues

Race/ethnicity	Occupation 1	Occupation 2	Occupation 3
White men	Managers, n.e.c.	Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	First-line supervisors of sales workers
AANHPI women	Registered nurses	Software developers, applications and systems software	Managers, n.e.c.
Asian women	Registered nurses	Software developers, applications and systems software	Managers, n.e.c.
Native Hawaiian women	Cashiers	Waiters and waitresses	First-line supervisors of sales workers
Pacific Islander women	Personal care aides	Customer service representatives	Cashiers

Note: The authors calculated the top three occupations for non-Hispanic, AANHPI women by ethnic group and for non-Hispanic, white men by collapsing weighted person counts by ethnicity and occupation, ranking each occupation by its total count within each subgroup, and retaining only the top three. Occupational groups are designated using the IPUMS harmonized coding scheme (occ2010) for comparisons over several years. The category of "Managers, n.e.c." includes postmasters, and "n.e.c.," which stands for "not elsewhere classified," is a catchall for categories that are not elsewhere classified in the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Classification System Manual. Median earnings data are the median wages for all women and all men. They are not specific to any racial or ethnic group. Earnings data are rounded to the nearest hundred, and calulations from the underlying data may not sum due to rounding. The median wage for male physicians has been top-coded in the underlying data, and hence the reported wage difference is a lower-bound estimate. Refer to the notes section of American Community Survey, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Detailed Table B24122 to understand how median wages are estimated. In some cases, the names of specific occupations varied compared with the listed occupations in the IPUMS microdata used to identify the top occupations. In these instances, the closest available match was selected. For example, "Chefs and cooks" was matched to "Chefs and head cooks," "Software developers, applications and systems software" to "Software developers," and "Physicians and surgeons" to "Other physicians." In the category of "Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides," the average of "Home health aides," "Nursing assistants," and "Orderlies and psychiatric aides" was used. For "Food service and lodging managers," the average of "Food service managers" and "Lodging managers" was used. Similarly, for "First-line supervisors of sales workers," the average of the "First-line supervisors in retail sales workers" and "First-line supervisors of non-retail sales workers" was applied. "Social workers" is the average of "Child, family, and school social workers," "Healthcare social workers," "Mental health and substance abuse social workers," and "Social workers, all other." The category of "Other Asian," which includes those not classified under the specific groups shown, is not included in the subpopulation breakouts in this table but is included for calculations of the AANHPI aggregates. Bhutanese women are removed from the subpopulation breakouts in this table due to poor reliability at the 90 percent confidence level; however, they are included for calcuations of the AANHPI aggregates.

Source: Authors' analysis of Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 15.0, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2024 American Community Survey" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2024); U.S. Census Bureau, "American Community Survey Table B24123: Detailed Occupation by Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) for the Full-Time, Year-Round Civilian Employed Female Population 16 Years and Over" (last accessed February 2025); U.S. Census Bureau, "American Community Survey Table 24122: Detailed Occupation by Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months (in 2023 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) for the Full-Time, Year-Round Civilian Employed Male Population 16 Years and Over" (last accessed February 2025); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Using the Occupational Classification System Manual (OCSM)" (last accessed February 2025).

Some AANHPI women are more likely than AANHPI women as an aggregate group to work in service occupations that pay substantially lower wages. For example, the analysis finds Bangladeshi, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Native Hawaiian women are heavily represented in service-oriented jobs such as cashiers, waitresses, aides, and assemblers. Similarly, the majority of Fijian, Samoan, and Tongan women work as personal care aides. These roles typically have lower wages and limited opportunities for career advancement.

Across the top 3 most common occupations for AANHPI women, regardless of ethnic subgroup, median wages of all women consistently lagged those of all men within the occupation. Many service-oriented jobs had some of the steepest wage gaps. For example, female cashiers earned a median wage of $27,292 compared with $29,991 for their male counterparts—equivalent to 91 cents for every $1. Similarly, personal care aides saw a 10 percent gap, with women earning $32,741 and men earning $36,267.

AANHPI women in health care

While health care roles can generally offer stability and decent wages, AANHPI women tend to work in lower-paid roles that lack the upward mobility of other health care positions, further contributing to wage disparities. For example, the top occupations for Filipino and Nepalese women were registered nurses and nursing/psychiatric aides. Immigrant women can also be particularly vulnerable to exploitation in sectors such as health care. However, the prevalence of

AANHPI women working as registered nurses highlights that AANHPI women – and women in general – were critical to ensuring health outcomes during the pandemic and continue to be an integral part of the health care system.

AANHPI women have a higher propensity to work in sectors such as service and care work, which tend to be lower paid than the sectors that white, non-Hispanic men dominate. These sectors also have disproportionately high rates of sexual harassment and workplace discrimination. For AANHPI women in the United States, particularly immigrant women who lack legal status, the fear of retaliation, coupled with the risk of losing employment, can make it even more difficult to speak out against injustices or seek legal recourse.

Some AANHPI women have access to higher-paying professional opportunities; for example, Chinese and Indian women are more likely to be employed in professional fields, such as management occupations. Yet even across these occupations, women's median wages lag men's. Higher-paying careers such as software development, accounting, and managerial roles tend to exhibit a larger absolute wage gap, which can result in a substantial cumulative economic impact over the lifetime.

Read more:
Improving the Experiences of Immigrant Women in the Health Care Sector - Center for American Progress

5. Education doesn't explain the wage gap for many AANHPI women

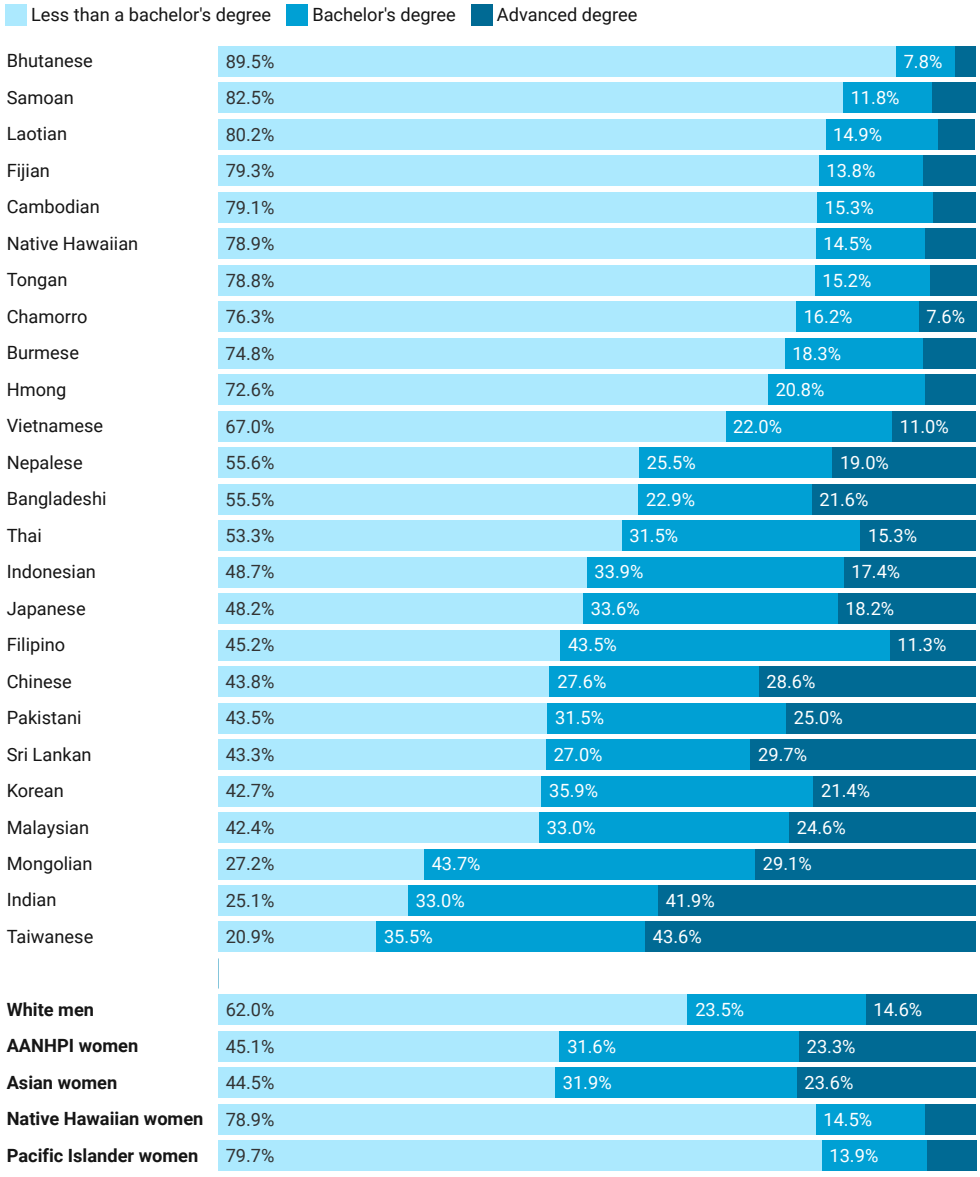
For many AANHPI women, education does not always translate into higher-paid jobs, and according to the analysis, educational attainment varies widely across different ethnic groups, from high levels of advanced degrees among Taiwanese and Indian women to lower education levels among Bhutanese, Burmese, Laotian, Samoan, and Tongan women.

Many AANHPI women have higher educational attainment, with a greater likelihood of holding a bachelor's degree or higher, than white, non-Hispanic men. Fifty-five percent of AANHPI women have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 38 percent of white, non-Hispanic men. Only about 20 percent of Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander women held a bachelor's degree or higher. (see Figure 4)

FIGURE 4

Educational attainment varies widely among AANHPI women

Educational attainment levels of AANHPI women ages 25 and older, by ethnic group, 2019–2023



Notes: The authors' calculations include non-Hispanic populations only. Percentages may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. The category of "Other Asian," which includes those not classified under the specific groups shown, is not included in the subpopulation breakouts in this table but is included for calculations of the AANHPI aggregates.

Source: Authors' analysis of Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 15.0, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2024 American Community Survey" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2024).

While higher education is associated with higher-paid employment, advanced qualifications do not guarantee higher-paying or better-skill-matched jobs. Many AANHPI women, despite holding advanced degrees, may still end up in lower-paying jobs, suggesting systemic barriers such as discrimination, lack of networks, or limited access to opportunities. Underemployment and skill underutilization also remain a prevalent issue for many AANHPI women.

Conclusion

Not all AANHPI women experience the success that is often assumed when looking at aggregated data. There are significant differences between groups, and many face low-quality jobs with little advancement opportunity and can become stuck in lower-wage occupations. Across almost every job type, AANHPI women earn less than white, non-Hispanic men. Even in high-paying jobs such as managers or software developers, the wage gap remains wide, highlighting that education alone is not enough to break down barriers.

This analysis underscores the importance of disaggregating racial and ethnic data to understand better the diverse constituencies that aggregated data often mask. Disaggregated data can ensure policy solutions target the specific challenges facing different AANHPI communities and help dispel racial stereotypes about AANHPI women.

** Unless otherwise stated, all facts and figures in this report rely on the authors' analysis of ACS 5-year data and are therefore averages across the time period.*

*** Wage gaps were calculated using the median annual earnings for a worker who worked at least 35 hours per week (full time) and at least 50 weeks during the previous calendar year (year round). Based on the proposed $17 per hour minimum wage, this full-time, year-round worker would earn an estimated $29,750 annually (annual average salary = 17×35×50). Using a standard rounding approach, the authors rounded this figure to $30,000 per year, providing a clear benchmark for wage classification and analysis.*