



‘O kēia ‘ōlelo hō’ike no ke
Komikina Kūlana Olakino o Nā Wāhine

Testimony on behalf of the
Hawai‘i State Commission on the Status of Women

Prepared for the
United States House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Honoring ‘Equal Pay Day’: Examining the Long-Term Economic Impacts of Gender Inequality

Wednesday, March 24, 2021 at 9:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

Dear Chair Maloney, Ranking Member Comey, and Honorable Members:

My name is Khara Jabola-Carolus and I serve as the Executive Director of the Hawai‘i State Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). CSW is a statewide government agency based in Honolulu that is legislatively instructed to restore the venerated status of women through policy advocacy, research, resource distribution, and community partnerships. CSW bears the distinction of being the oldest commission for women in the United States and leading Hawai‘i to become the first state to decriminalize abortion. Last year, CSW became the first government agency in the world to propose a feminist economic recovery for the COVID-19 crisis.

You have heard about the disproportionate job losses, shadow pandemic of violence, and care crisis. I’m here to share what Hawai‘i is doing about it, in the hope that Hawai‘i’s example can guide Congress to better integrate knowledge developed by Native Hawaiian, Asian, Pacific Islander and Black women to define the nation’s economic future.

Hawai‘i is an Asian and indigenous majority state: 40% of the population identifies as Asian and 20% as Native Hawaiian. Nonetheless, patriarchy and racism determine whose labor is valuable and monetized in Hawai‘i. Instead of making these social hierarchies concrete and formalized, the Commission conceived *Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs: A Feminist Economic Recovery for Hawai‘i* in April 2020. The document encourages a structural transition to a need-based economy rather than a rush to rebuild the status quo. Lower earnings and less money for women, queer, and transgender people will perpetuate in one form or another if we do not confront the structures that produce these hierarchies.

Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs was created in deep consultation with community and the Hawai‘i Feminist COVID-19 Response Team, which included representation from historically sidelined groups: Compacts of Free Association migrants, Filipinos, Native Hawaiian public health experts, Black midwives, disability justice activists, single mothers, feminist economists, LGBTQ and anti-violence advocates. This was not about presenting a cornucopia of identities but rather harnessing marginalized knowledge, especially from working class women.

Underneath the glossy marketed image of Hawai‘i is one of America’s toughest economies to survive. Local residents are essentially a permanent underclass serving the dominant industry: tourism. This industry failed us almost overnight. Hawai‘i currently has the highest unemployment rate in the United States (10.2%) and unemployment breached 40% during the first pandemic lockdown.

According to a survey by the Hawai‘i State Tourism Authority, two-thirds of residents think that Hawai‘i is being “run for tourists at the expense of local people.”¹ This is hard to deny when 70% of Native Hawaiians and 80% of Filipinos self-report living paycheck to paycheck during times when tourism is booming.² Hawai‘i also has the lowest minimum wage in the nation when adjusted to the cost of living, including the lowest wages for early educators at \$9.25.³

Women in Hawai‘i face acute challenges: 80% of single mothers cannot afford a barebones household budget here. Before the pandemic, 85% of Americans living paycheck to paycheck were women and this was likely reflected in Hawai‘i.⁴ Data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic shows that women in Hawai‘i earned roughly 85 cents for every dollar men are paid, compared to the national average of 81 cents. Although Hawai‘i ranks eighth in the nation for overall amount women earned compared to men, when the data is disaggregated for race, it’s clear that women of color are in crisis. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women (categorized together) earn 61 cents for every dollar earned by a white man. Asian women earn 70 cents, which is also significantly less than the national average.

Further, the gender wage gap in Hawai‘i has barely budged over the past 25 years. In 1997, women earned 83.8 percent of what men earned and in 2018 this number backslid to 81.6 cents. Worse still, the gender wage gap is predicted to worsen in 2021 because women have suffered greater job losses (57%) in Hawai‘i and are rebounding slower than men generally.

Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs was developed against this backdrop of prolonged economic crisis for women. The following are several of the core principles that differentiate Hawai‘i’s plan from other proposals:

1. Establish gender justice, and specifically women’s liberation, as a core function of government. A feminist lens should be integrated into all policymaking because gender inequality does not self-resolve. Governments around the world have legislatively

¹ <https://www.civilbeat.org/2020/12/has-the-hawaii-tourism-industry-lost-its-clout/>

² <http://hitaxfairness.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/EITC-poll-report.pdf>

³ <https://csece.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/the-early-educator-workforce/early-educator-pay-economic-insecurity-across-the-states/>

⁴ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/14/women-live-paycheck-to-paycheck-roughly-5-times-as-often-as-men.html>

mandated “gender-and-development budgets” and “gender-responsive” planning, programming, and funding to correct gender inequalities that remain after centuries of formal discrimination against women. For example, the Philippines have enshrined women’s right to have their needs met by government during crisis management and rebuilding from catastrophes. This idea is hardly radical. The U.S. Department of Defense requires gender awareness training across branches and has developed an ex ante evaluation tool to help DoD forces think through a gender analysis.

2. Prioritize publicly available data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age and zipcode to determine how different women and gender variant people are faring.
3. Prevent neoliberal practices in government by contesting furloughs and budget cuts to social protection programs, which backfire by causing costly work delays, decreased consumer spending, lost tax revenue and negative impacts on socioeconomic equality. Reform the regressive tax system to maximize available resources.
4. Move beyond the GDP and utilize new measures of national prosperity that value non-monetary activities, people’s health, and environmental indicators.
5. Transition from economic dependency on overtourism, armed conflict, and land speculation. Fund land stewardship (environmental management) and local food systems that are designed around gender and racial equity.
6. Define the social protection floor for women and build new infrastructure around that content, such as maternity, childcare, and elder care. Increase subsidies to non-market care and raise provider wages for both center-based and kin care. Guarantee paid family leave to alleviate the need for early childcare.
7. Give land, housing, and money for housing to Native Hawaiians. Honor the State’s well-established commitment to the Native Hawaiian community by devoting a twenty percent pro rata share of the COVID-19-response funds in trust for their express recovery needs, which would help lift Native Hawaiian women from poverty. Adequately fund the Department of Hawaiian Homelands.
8. Incorporate gender-based violence prevention in the immediate response and long-term recovery. Implement the Bodies Back Model for noncarceral abolition of harmful industries that sell dehumanizing and hypersexualized stereotypes of Native Hawaiian, Pacifica, Asian and Black women, and LGBTQ people in Hawai‘i. The Bodies Back Model is an innovative approach developed by indigenous and immigrant women directly impacted by the sex trade, and it goes beyond both deregulation and carcerality.
9. Prioritize vulnerable groups such as transgender/mahu/gender non-conforming people. Hawai‘i has the highest transgender population of any state.⁵ Hawai‘i should set an employment goal for transgender people in the public sector.⁶ This is a logical next step following the SCOTUS Bostock decision that Title VII’s prohibition on discrimination

⁵ <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-adults-united-states/>

⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/argentina-add-more-transgender-people-labor-force-n1251586>

“because of . . . sex” covers discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, and President Biden's Executive Order clarifying the application of that decision.

This partial list reflects a living and evolving document that is materializing in real time. All but one county in Hawai‘i has passed legislation committing to a feminist economic recovery plan at the local level. In addition, the State Legislature is poised to create a statewide taskforce to implement the feminist recovery, which will include representation from all major government departments. The State has also created a statewide human trafficking coordinator to address the rise in exploitation during the pandemic, increased mental health services that reach impoverished women, subsidized more childcare than ever, and distributed free computers to single mothers of color, among other initiatives.

It was a choice all along to cement or correct women’s economic oppression. Accordingly, the Commission asks that the Committee ensure equal prioritization to racial, economic and gender justice and advance a comprehensive (feminist) lens in your critical work ahead.

Sincerely,

Khara Jabola-Carolus
Executive Director
Hawai‘i State Commission on the Status of Women