



Indigenous Women's  
*financial wellness*

# Women and Money

Barriers and opportunities for change



*First Nations*  
FOUNDATION

**First Nations women have faced many hurdles on the road to financial wellness due to factors outside of their control. This booklet outlines of some of the historical and current barriers affecting Indigenous women and girls.**

## **SNAPSHOT: WOMEN AND MONEY**

There are many reasons it's been more difficult for Indigenous women to achieve financial independence. Addressing the gap involves embracing women's history and practices, accommodating family responsibilities and providing education and training.

### **In 2015:**

- Just over half of First Nations women were working (51.5 per cent) compared to 65 per cent of First Nations men.
- Fewer than 1 in 5 Indigenous women were working full-time (18.5 per cent).
- Almost one in three women (29.8 per cent) have cared for someone in their family with a disability or health condition.

Source: ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014-15.

## **ABOUT FIRST NATIONS FOUNDATION**

First Nations Foundation is a national Indigenous financial wellbeing foundation led by an Indigenous majority board since 2006. It has a strong trust reputation with both financial and Indigenous community sectors, a powerful track record of results, agility and innovation.

The Foundation works to empower individuals and communities through 4 key areas of focus: financial education, superannuation outreach, community advocacy/leadership and research.

This resource has been developed by First Nations Foundation through its Indigenous Women's Financial Wellness strategy. To learn more visit [firstnationsfoundation.org.au](http://firstnationsfoundation.org.au)



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## ‘STOLEN WAGES’

### How history has shaped women's experiences

Despite being the traditional landowners, it wasn't long ago that Indigenous people had their money controlled by others and had to ask for permission to work.

From the late 1890s, 'Aboriginal Protection Acts' were in place in several states and territories that made Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families wards of the state. Often non-Indigenous people would be assigned by the government to manage every part of their lives.

In fact, the government and what it called "protectors" managed how money was given to Indigenous people, where people worked and how their children were taught. For example, while children and young adults between the ages of 14 and 21 could work as apprentices, they were not allowed to leave their jobs unless they got permission.

### How money was controlled

The government and its "protectors" would hold onto the money Indigenous people earned. At the time, the government said this was done to look after the needs of the family. However, this system made it very hard for Indigenous people to buy homes or land or improve their lives with education or jobs of their choice. Sometimes Indigenous people would just receive an allowance or "pocket money".

While First Nations people were sometimes allowed to be educated, it was often at a lower level, so that they could get domestic work or work as a labourer.

People who experienced this say their money was stolen and through a campaign called 'Stolen Wages' demanded it be returned. Under the campaign, Indigenous people sought to claw back some of the money that was taken from them and their families and sometimes use it to support older generations. While some were successful in getting payments, not all of the money has been returned.

### What's happened since then?

There have now been a series of changes to recognise the rights of Indigenous people, but First Nations women still face significant barriers due to their history in a system that did not recognise their right to financial independence.

#### Here are some key changes:

- 1967** There was a **referendum** to recognise the inequalities Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people face and have faced.
- 1990** The **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)** was set up to look after a number of programs including employment, health, education and housing and to address disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and the wider Australian community. However, it was dissolved in 2005.
- 1992** The Federal Government brought in the **Superannuation Guarantee (SG)** to give all working Australians, including Indigenous people, money for retirement. When we work, 10 per cent of our money goes into a retirement account.
- 2008** Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made an **apology** to the families of Indigenous people and the Stolen Generations.

## CARING AND UNPAID WORK

### How it affects women's financial situation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women often take their family responsibilities very seriously. In practice, this often means they put the care of their children, their partners and their parents or grandparents before themselves. This can make it difficult to also balance paid work.

Similarly, women are more likely to look after someone who is sick for a long time or someone who has a disability. In 2015, Australian Bureau of Statistics found almost one in three Indigenous women (29.8 per cent) have been responsible for caring for someone with a long-term health condition or disability, compared to one in five Indigenous men (20.8 per cent). Again, these responsibilities make it harder to earn an income or to save.

It's well known in Indigenous communities that these caring values are often passed down from one generation to the next. In many communities, grandparents often take on significant roles caring for their grandchildren, so children learn cultural and community ways of growing up. Elders often share stories and cultural knowledge with their grandchildren and protect them from harm. As with all women though, this can come at a cost to their own financial security. Often they are unable to do paid work because of these roles.

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## WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

### Where we stand

Fewer First Nations women are represented in the workforce than First Nations men. In fact, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found just over half of Indigenous women (51.5 per cent) were working, compared to almost two-thirds of Indigenous men (65 per cent) in 2015.

At the same time, Indigenous women tend to work fewer hours than men. The ABS survey found 22.6 per cent of First Nations women work part time and 18 per cent work full time.

There are many reasons for this difference, including household and caring responsibilities, different cultural views about work and a lack of opportunities or exclusion. For example, caring for children can often make it more difficult to gain further education or climb the career ladder.

While some of these factors are being addressed, much more work needs to be done to ensure women feel welcome in the workforce and can be supported to manage their other roles.



## THE GENDER PAY GAP

The industries most Indigenous women work in tend to have less secure employment and lower wages. For example, women make up 80 per cent of the care workforce, which remains one of our lowest paid industries.

Figures show Indigenous women are most likely to work in the healthcare, childcare, social support, and aged care sectors. Unfortunately, these all tend to have lower average wages than most other industries.

**Working in lower paid and insecure jobs has long term implications for women**, such as a lower superannuation balances, difficulty building up wealth and fewer opportunities for career development.

Location and education levels can also affect the type of work and salary Indigenous women receive. These factors are sometimes beyond the control of Indigenous women due to family dynamics, such as pressure to drop out of school or caring responsibilities.

## THE SUPER GAP

### Why women retire with less

Superannuation is designed to give all Australians comfort in their later years, but unfortunately, many First Nations women retire without enough to achieve this.

We know First Nations women finish their working lives with much less in their super accounts than non-Indigenous people and in particular men. The Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees estimates **the average Indigenous woman retires with just 61 per cent of the super balance of the average non-Indigenous man**.

However, Indigenous women may retire with even less than we think. A report from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance said it's often hard to estimate what the true amount is because super funds often don't ask whether someone identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

There are a number of reasons for the gap between Indigenous women and men's super balances, including the following:

- Time spent out of the workforce to raise children
- Lower paid roles mean less compulsory contributions to super
- An historical lack of information about super
- A lack of culturally-sensitive information about money in general
- Time out of work for caring or healthcare reasons
- Financial abuse.

Efforts have been made to address this disparity, but again, more needs to be done to ensure Indigenous women have more security and comfort in retirement. First Nations Foundation is hoping to help tackle this issue with its educational programs for women, but some structural changes still need to be made to ensure women have the same opportunities as men in the workforce.

## WAYS TO GET ACCESS TO TRAINING

One way of increasing Indigenous women's access to work and financial security is through training.

Below are some of the common pathways:

### Traineeships

A traineeship allows people to learn on-the-job skills, while also earning a wage or salary. Traineeships cover many different areas and industries, from business-related fields such as marketing and business administration, to hairdressing and health-related programs.

Traineeships can be school based, full-time or part time. Traineeships can also be a great way to get work experience and gain a formal qualification at the same time. Trainees need to attend a TAFE or a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) to gain this qualification.

### Apprenticeships

Like traineeships, apprenticeships involve a combination of study and work. Apprenticeships are usually offered in trades, such as carpentry, plumbing, or bricklaying. While these trades have traditionally been male-dominated, a growing number of women have been training in these areas. An apprenticeship usually runs for three or four years and employers who offer them often receive incentives, such as funding, to help train apprentices.

### Choosing a recognised training organisation

Indigenous women who are looking for a recognised training organisation (RTO) for an apprenticeship or traineeship may wish to consider the following:

- Does the workplace have a good record in supporting and understanding issues that might impact on a trainee e.g., family, and cultural responsibilities?
- Are mentors provided?
- Is there a First Nations cultural capability worker?
- Has the workplace hired other Indigenous women and what has their experience been?

### Where to find culturally-appropriate work or training

First Nations Recognised Training Organisations:

- Sydney-based **Yarn'n Employment Services** provides training and employment to First Nations women in the health sector. The agency recruits trainee assistants in the nursing acute care area and also puts people in touch with other employers.
- Sydney-based **Olympus Solutions** also focuses on providing job-specific training in culturally appropriate workplaces. The agency also helps people they place with ongoing job support.
- Northern Territory-based **Replay**, which also has arms in NSW, Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria, has early-childhood and aged care based training programs.
- Perth-based **Wirrpanda Foundation** works with other employment agencies to place Indigenous women and men.
- Australia-wide **ATWork Australia** helps companies to improve their cultural skills.

## CULTURAL BELIEFS

**Long-held cultural beliefs about wealth and the history of Indigenous economy shape women's experiences today.**

It's worth remembering that Indigenous women's history with money has not been easy. As the first inhabitants and owners of the land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not initially use money as a currency. When money was introduced as a currency, their money and choices—even their children—were controlled by others under the 'Aboriginal Protection Act'. Unsurprisingly, this produced a mistrust of government. It was only a few decades ago that this pattern officially ended and Aboriginal people were given more freedoms. As such, Indigenous women often have an uneasy relationship with money, which is sometimes driven by information that has been passed down to them.

The Indigenous attitude to money is also influenced by the cultural values of sharing and community. For many First Nations women, cultural identity, connection to family and land and 'caring and sharing' are important to keeping ties among kin. Aboriginal people's experience of money and their social obligations to their kin influences both how they manage their money and how they approach wealth.

As a result of this history and these cultural values, the idea of 'putting yourself first' in the pursuit of money doesn't come naturally to a lot of Indigenous women. This must be taken into account by anyone who is trying to help Indigenous women build their financial resources.

## INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND FINANCIAL LITERACY

Sadly, Indigenous women and men have a long history of trauma, which includes but is not limited to colonisation, disease, violence and the forced removal of children. This trauma can be passed down to other generations through actions, such as children and grandchildren of the people who have first experienced the trauma. This is called intergenerational trauma. When someone has experienced something horrible—such as abuse or violence—they can be badly affected and express their pain through certain behaviours. These behaviours can sometimes include substance abuse and further violence.

Intergenerational trauma can affect many aspects of life in negative ways. Figures show First Nations women experience higher rates of incarceration than non-Indigenous women, as well as higher rates of suicide, homelessness, unemployment and substance abuse. Family violence is also a significant factor in Indigenous communities.

As a result of these factors, it can be a lot harder for Indigenous women to get ahead financially or get back on their feet if they've experienced a trauma or negative life event. At the same time, lower levels of financial literacy can make it more difficult to make a fresh start financially.

Similarly, if someone is experiencing extreme hardship or has gone through a trauma, their focus is likely to be on their most immediate circumstances. Therefore, their desire to learn about money may not be as high as it could be for someone else. Policymakers and educators must consider these factors when trying to improve financial literacy.

## THE INTERGENERATIONAL WEALTH GAP

### **A lack of intergenerational wealth and trusted people affects Indigenous women.**

Indigenous people haven't had much opportunity to build up intergenerational wealth, given the history of stolen wages and exclusion from employment, land ownership and financial markets in general. In fact, up until recently, Indigenous women and men have been largely left out of the financial services conversation in Australia. Banks and superannuation funds did not see First Nations women as a high priority, as the system was focused on customers with higher balances. Thankfully, this is slowly changing.

While financial literacy education is improving, trust is still a key barrier. Not surprisingly, Indigenous women and men have reported significant distrust in the government and financial representatives after their history of being mistreated. While the avenues are now available for Indigenous people to build wealth, recovering from a history of being dismissed and excluded takes time.

Practices to support Indigenous women must take into account their cultural relationship with money and the factors that affect their wealth, such as family dynamic, jobs, education and the financial system.

## BREAKING THE CYCLE

### **First Nations women can break the cycle of poverty for their communities with education and empowerment.**

For Indigenous women who have grown up in a family with very little money, it may seem difficult to break the poverty cycle and build wealth. While this is true, there are certain opportunities today that were not around for a young women's parents or grandparents.

To start with, it is easier today to move between cities and country areas. Previously, some Indigenous people would grow up in areas with few employment opportunities and the chance to change that was limited. Today, it is much easier to change location for a job or another opportunity. Employers are also far more open to embracing and helping Indigenous employees.

Second, technology has never been better than it is today. This means that Indigenous communities can stay connected through the internet and experience the same education as non-Indigenous people. While some Indigenous people still live remotely and have poor access to the internet, First Nations Foundation research shows the vast majority of young Indigenous people have some internet connectivity. As a result, it is easier to access both tertiary education and financial literacy skills from most locations. Importantly, it is also easier to access support services for women fleeing domestic violence or financial abuse.

While there is much further to go in terms of enabling women to experience financial empowerment, some of the initial groundwork has been laid. Through further education and a system that supports culture, tradition and family dynamics, it is hoped a greater proportion of Indigenous women will achieve financial independence.