

# The Experiences of Asian 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 Asian women in Utah shared at two of these gatherings. Additional background information and research methods can be found [here](#). This summary complements the following [research snapshot](#). Readers should bear in mind that the women who participated represent a vast array of cultures and countries.

## MOST PRESSING ISSUES

- 1 Exclusion
- 2 Mental health support
- 3 Education
- 4 Caregiving

### EXCLUSION

**A belonging gap:** Participants noted the “unique intersection” Asian women are in, as they are often not considered to be Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and are excluded from or overlooked for conversations that may directly impact them (e.g., access to resources, safety, institutional redesign). Because they are not White, they often do not feel included in mainstream conversations. Representing a significant number of commenters, one woman stated, “I have run groups for faculty of color, and Asian faculty will ask if they are invited, if they belong.”

**Need for community and visibility:** Asian women need to see more of each other, whether that means socially or in leadership positions. Women spoke of the importance of creating community and establishing groups that welcome, celebrate various holidays, and organize for social change. As one woman said, “Asian women can tend to be too quiet, but we need to be loud now.” They also felt the need for all Utahns to see more Asian women, so joining groups in which they may be the only Asian woman was also encouraged.

**Varied generational experiences:** It is important for all Utahns to understand the varied experiences of Utah Asians. Some have been in Utah for generations but are still treated as “fresh off the boat, perpetual foreigners” regardless of their stature in the community. In addition, second- and third-generation Utah Asians may have cultural and experiential differences and expectations from the generation of women who immigrated.

**Tokenism:** Being included on boards or teams feels like tokenism when their voices are not being heard, considered, or valued.

**Cultural acceptance and awareness:** These women noted that many Utahns have not experienced other cultures, often don't know people of color, and are not inclusive. As one participant stated, “My neighbors are very nice one-on-one, but they never invite me over to dinner. In Texas, we would be invited to dinner all the time. . . . Here, I invite them, but they don't invite me back.” It is hard for some to see their White neighbors enjoy community, while they wonder why they are not included. One explained, “It is sad to me that there must be so many wonderful people from different countries and cultures here in Utah, and people

don't really desire meeting these people and their good value.” Another stated, “People here are very nice, but they don't want to cross the line and get to know you. Back in California, we were approached by others. Here, we have to approach.”

### MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

**Rise up:** Asian Americans have tended to turn a blind eye to racism and microaggressions “in order to be a good Asian American and in order to survive in this country.” But the anti-Asian hate that escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic has caused Asians in Utah to realize the importance of talking about their experiences with racism and to better understand microaggressions and how adverse experiences affect their mental health. This is especially true for Asian women that identify as LGBTQ+ because of potential additional cultural stigma.

**Therapists from their community:** There are not enough resources to assist people with the complexity and pressure of adjusting to a new culture and language. Immigrant parents often disregard their own mental health, which impacts their children (intergenerational



effects). The women explained that it is challenging to find therapists who have cultural training to understand their experiences; Utah needs more women therapists of color from diverse backgrounds. As one individual noted, "When I first came to Utah and started school, I was still learning English. Because of all the pressure, . . . I had a panic attack in class, and the counselor on campus told me my English wasn't good enough and to go back to my country. Luckily, I'm a tough enough person."

## EDUCATION

### **Unacceptable educational environments:**

Participants noted generational recurrence of experiencing racism in schools (e.g., overt slurs, making fun of their lunches, covert general exclusion). Some families came to Utah from more diverse states where they and their children did not have issues fitting in and finding friends. Some examples include the following:

- One mother worried that teachers are not equipped to help minority students as schools increasingly become change-resistant political battlefields, and "the voices trying to maintain the status quo are so much louder than what we have to offer."
- Another participant explained: "My eight-year-old just had somebody slant his eyes and say, 'Ching chong,' and my son said, 'That's racist' and went to the principal. The principal was super supportive, but also, you're scared to be labeled as 'that parent.' I am now the parent whose kid is running around telling everyone they're racist. Right?"

It's like you're so proud but you're also so nervous."

- One woman said, "Mine are quiet, nice kids having a hard time. In Texas, my boy never dealt with race, he was always welcoming and had many friends. Here, he is teased about his eyes. Even by the high schoolers, sometimes."

### **Lack of cultural awareness:**

Participants assume the lack of cultural awareness in schools contributes to the racism and exclusion their children face. Schools need to include various perspectives in their curriculum and celebrate different cultures far more often. They also note that if different cultures are not welcome in the home, the school experience may not have the needed absorption that leads to generational impact. As one attendee mentioned, "Utah is an incredible place because of the Asian contribution throughout history, whether it was the railroad or mining, our contribution to this history makes Utah what it is today. . . . It's time to have the voices of Native Americans, the voices of Black Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans in the curriculum in our schools."

**Opportunities for Asian women:** Many women lack training and skills, particularly after divorce. This is exacerbated if they are from a different culture, as some have college degrees from other countries that were not transferable to the US or they lack English fluency. Therefore, they are qualified only for low-skill, low-pay jobs. What they are capable of doing in Utah is not valued. Asian cultures emphasize education because education is the best equalizer. As one woman noted, "I know

we all have our goals and desires; we don't have to stay small in this country. We can add value here."

### **Financial literacy and entrepreneurship:**

Due to corrupt governments in various countries of origin, Asian Americans may not trust banks or other savings and investment institutions, and thus they may not be saving up for retirement as well as they could be. Additionally, even though they may be entrepreneurially minded, some Asian women lack the knowledge of the resources that exist that could help them start a business or help their business thrive.

## CAREGIVING

Cultural considerations in caregiving: When families emigrate, the intergenerational care burden is felt by Asian women. However, many immigrants do not emigrate with extended family, and thus do not have built-in elder care or childcare. The solitary elderly may be growing older alone and have persistent communication issues, while those in need of childcare may have a cultural distrust of babysitters and prefer licensed centers, which are incredibly expensive and hard to get into, especially for students with limited schedules and budgets.

This group was convened by:

- Marin Christensen
- Lillian Tsosie-Jensen
- Andrea Schmutz

## ACTION ITEMS FROM PARTICIPANTS

- Avoid tokenism by listening to and considering the perspective of women of color rather than including them in conversations as tokens.
- Create diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) committees only if they move towards action and results (many do not).
- Enhance outreach efforts for resource awareness and sustain efforts with lasting funding.
- Ensure that families can stay together and care for each other by changing zoning for housing (e.g., accessory dwelling units).
- Improve access to mental healthcare and incentivize more women of color from all ethnicities to become counselors and therapists.
- Include financial literacy and business ownership training in immigration services.
- Increase cultural awareness and include multicultural narratives in history; emphasize cultural celebrations throughout the year for all Utahns.
- Normalize including and hearing from Utah women of color for all decision-making bodies.
- Transfer international degrees to state institutions.