

The Struggles and Contributions of Indigenous Women in Oxnard

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Introduction



Oxnard, a coastal city in California, is known for its thriving agricultural industry and vibrant immigrant community, which together form the backbone of its local economy. Like many cities that attract immigrants, Oxnard has been shaped by global economic forces that draw people seeking employment and hoping to build a better life. Today, Latina/o immigrants and their children make up the vast majority of the city's population.

While the Latina/o community is highly visible in Oxnard, the city is also home to a large population of Indigenous immigrants from Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Central America. Since the 1970s, Indigenous people have played a critical role in shaping the city's labor force, especially in agriculture and other essential industries (Rivera Salgado 2015). However, despite their deep roots and numerous contributions, many Indigenous immigrants continue to face significant economic and social challenges.

For Indigenous women in particular, these challenges are often compounded. Many work in low-wage jobs where they may be vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual harassment, and are also burdened by unpaid domestic responsibilities. These barriers make it harder for them to achieve financial stability and upward mobility. Still, Indigenous women are often leaders in their communities, drawing on strong traditions of mutual support, cultural preservation, and collective care. These values spur civic engagement and strengthen Oxnard's social fabric.

This report draws on findings from the Oxnard Thriving Youth Study (TYS), led by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, to shed light on the experiences of Indigenous women in comparison to those of their non-Indigenous Latina peers. Our analysis is based on responses from 1,675 participants living in Oxnard, including 1,392 non-Indigenous Latinas and 283 Indigenous respondents. Findings indicate that Indigenous women disproportionately face economic, health, educational, and discriminatory challenges. They nonetheless remain deeply engaged in their communities and foster local social and civic connections. As such, our study underscores the important role of Indigenous women in civic life in Oxnard.

Ethnic Diversity among Oxnard's Immigrant Origin Residents



Indigenous peoples from Mexico residing in Ventura County primarily migrate from southern states such as Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Puebla (MICOP 2025). Contrary to dominant, deficit-based narratives that depict a monolith, Indigenous peoples compose vibrant multi-ethnic and multilingual communities. For example, the southern region of Mexico is home to

numerous Indigenous groups, including Mixteco, Zapotec, Mayan, and Purépecha peoples. Within the Mayan linguistic group alone, there are over 20 languages and 43 recognized variants; major Indigenous languages include Zapoteco, Mixteco, and Nahuatl (Indigenous Mexico 2023). Because Indigeneity predates the history of colonization in the Americas, it is also important to note that Indigenous communities transcend borders. Indigenous peoples migrate from different parts of the Americas, including Central and South America. Overall, women tend to be slightly outnumbered by men among Oxnard’s Indigenous residents.

Inequality and Discrimination



Latinas in Oxnard encounter a range of alarming economic, health, and economic challenges that limit their ability to thrive, and those with Indigenous family origins face even greater obstacles. To begin, many Indigenous women lack the opportunities to attend or complete formal schooling. Consequently, as figure 1 illustrates, 44% of Indigenous women, compared to 11% of non-Indigenous Latinas, do not have a high school degree. Along with this educational deficit, Indigenous women encounter a range of other challenges. For example, 37% of Indigenous women lack access to a private vehicle, thereby limiting their ability to secure jobs and access resources. Furthermore, approximately 1 in 9 reported being unhoused, and two-thirds experience housing insecurity, meaning that they reported difficulty meeting

Figure 1. Economic Challenges Experienced by Indigenous Women and Non-Indigenous Latinas, Ages 18-34

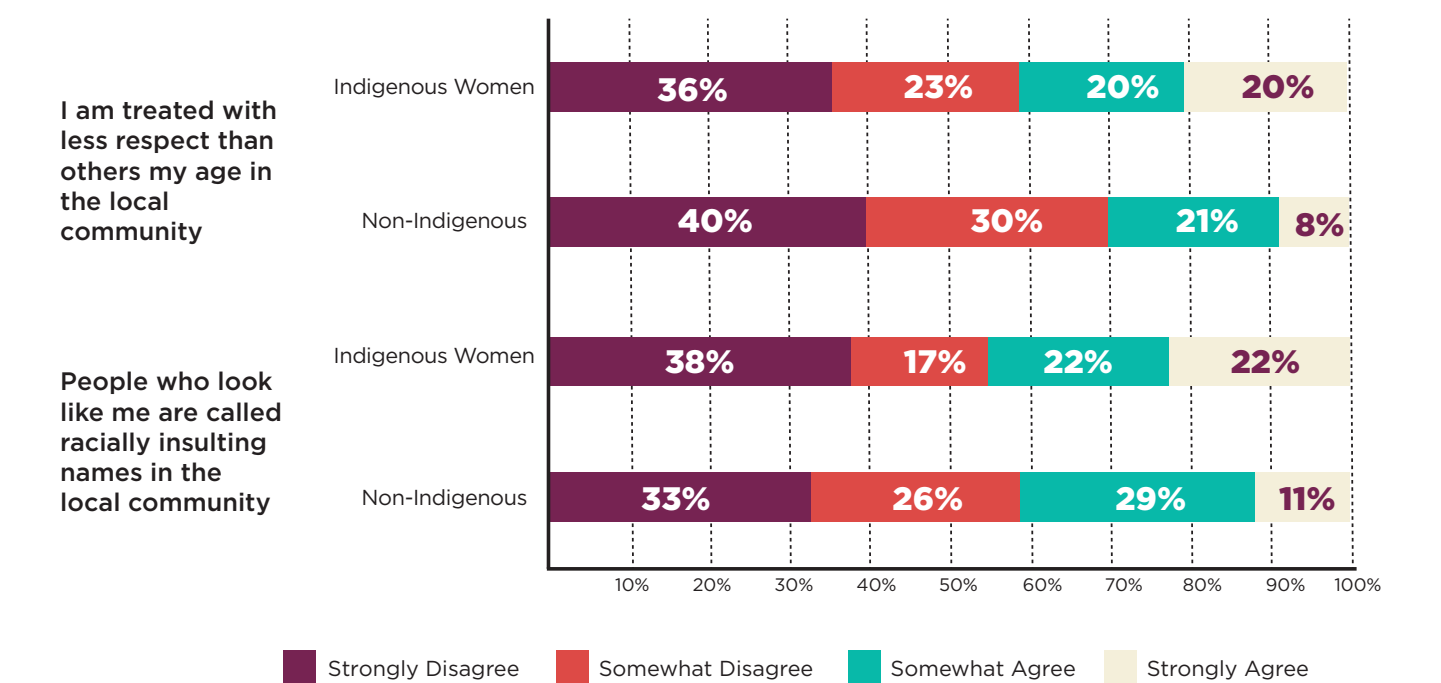


Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023

housing costs. Food and nutrition insecurity is another pressing issue. When asked if their household had enough food, 59% of Indigenous women said that this was “sometimes true” or “often true.” Additionally, when asked if their household could afford balanced meals, 57% indicated this was “sometimes true” or “often true.” Indigenous women are also more than twice as likely as their non-Indigenous counterparts to lack health insurance (37% compared to 15%). Finally, about a third of Indigenous women do not have regular access to the internet, compared to 7% of non-Indigenous Latinas.

In the TYS survey, we asked young adult residents about their experiences living in the local community. The results shown in figure 2 reveal troubling patterns of injustice that particularly affect Indigenous women. Respondents reported disproportionately high levels of unfair treatment, including racial discrimination. Participants were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, somewhat disagreed, or strongly disagreed with a series of statements related to their lived experiences. The findings are stark: Indigenous women were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous Latinas to strongly agree that they are treated with less respect than their peers in the local community (20% compared to 8%). Similarly, 22% of Indigenous women strongly agreed that people who look like them are called racially insulting names, compared to 11% of non-Indigenous Latinas. Racism and other forms of discrimination—often perpetrated by non-Indigenous residents, including those who identify as Latina/o/Hispanic—may contribute to the ongoing economic, employment-related, and broader structural challenges facing Indigenous residents.

Figure 2. Discrimination and Racism Experienced among Oxnard’s Indigenous Women and Non-Indigenous Latinas, Ages 18-34



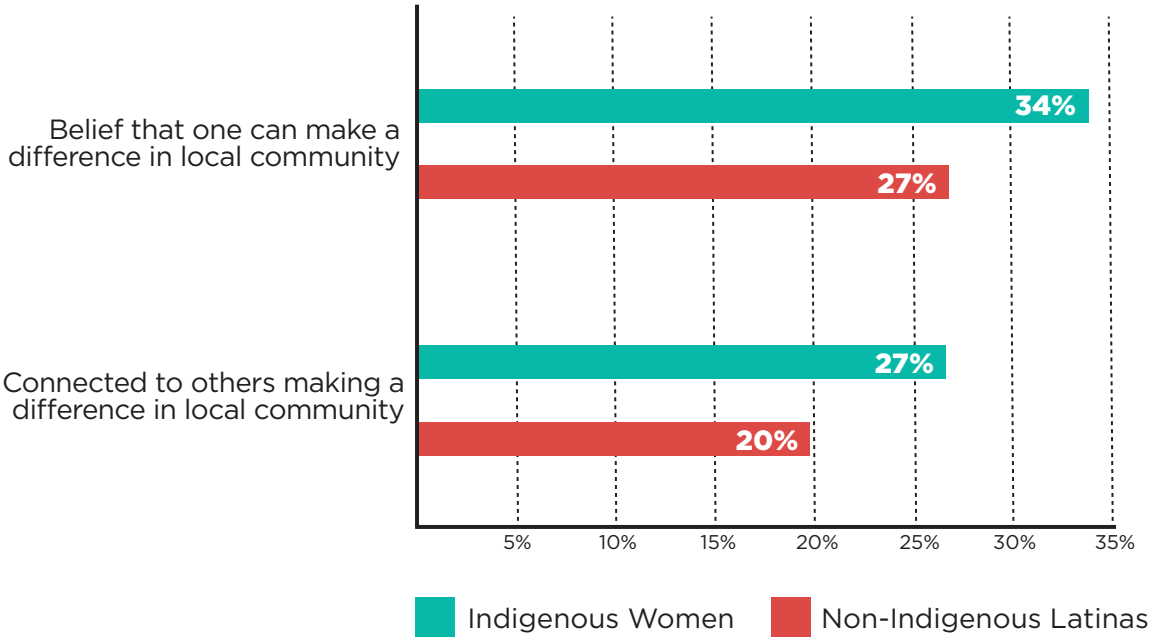
Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023

Educational Aspirations and Civic Engagement



Despite enduring multiple hardships and discrimination, Indigenous women remain active in their community. The TYS survey asked them about their level of agreement with various statements regarding their civic engagement. In figure 3, the findings show that Indigenous women are more likely than their peers to strongly agree that they can make a difference in their community (34% compared to 27% for non-Indigenous Latinas). Additionally, 27% of Indigenous women strongly agree that they are connected to others making a difference in their local community, while only 20% of non-Indigenous Latinas reported the same. These findings affirm that despite the adversity they experience, Indigenous women are not only engaged in their community but are integral to improving its collective well-being. They are important local actors whose voices and perspectives should be centered in defining the future of Oxnard.

Figure 3. Civic Agency among Indigenous Women and Non-Indigenous Latinas, Ages 18-34



Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023

Conclusion



While this report highlights the hardships and discrimination that Indigenous women face, it also underscores the strength and promise of their civic engagement. The findings identify an urgent need for policymakers, philanthropic organizations, and other stakeholders to meaningfully address the needs of Indigenous women and invest in their well-being, leadership, and long-term success. As leaders within their communities, Indigenous women are essential broader efforts toward community uplift and resilience. Their voices must be recognized, respected, and elevated—especially in shaping solutions during times of both crisis and opportunity. Oxnard has a unique opportunity to build a more inclusive future by centering the needs and priorities of its diverse Indigenous population.

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