GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT IN U.S. NATIVE NATIONS: 1990-2000

KEY QUESTION:

How did the economic opportunities of the 1990s play out for U.S. tribes in terms of employment?

Employment growth was to be expected under the conditions of the 1990s. The unexpected finding was that women disproportionately drove these gains.

Why were the 1990s a key decade for U.S. tribes?

- Self-determination contracts and self-governance contracts — tribes taking greater control of their finances and futures.
- Casinos and other related tribal enterprises coming online during this period. Tribes developed significant expertise in business and finance. Many emerged from the decade as major economic players locally, regionally, and nationally (Taylor & Kalt 2005).

Population

Federally recognized reservations in the 48 contiguous U.S. states, with populations greater than 1,000 in the year 2000. Data are pulled from the U.S. Census.

From 1990 through 2000, the employment rate for women rose from 42.9% to 47.3%. Men’s employment rate growth was much flatter during the period, changing from 47.0% employment to 47.8%.

Findings

For each graph, each marker represents federally recognized reservations in the 48 contiguous U.S. states. If a marker is below the red line, then it represents a nation where men have a higher rate of employment than do women. If a marker is above the red line, then it represents a nation where women have a higher rate of employment than men. By the year 2000, women were employed at a higher rate than men in a majority of tribes.

Why did women’s employment gains outpace men’s on American Indian reservations?

There are several possibilities:

1. Women are outpacing men in education
2. Women are more driven to get a job because of family obligations
3. On-reservation employment opportunities (in government and in service industries) don’t appeal to men
   a. Employment opportunities that appeal to men are off-reservation
   b. Employment opportunities that appeal to men are decreasing on reservation
4. Women may be more economical to hire as typically they are paid less than men for similar work
5. Women are more willing to work part-time and for limited benefits
6. Women are perceived as less likely to suffer from addictions and disabilities that risk their reliability as employees
7. Women are perceived as less likely to have criminal records that could impede their being hired due to background checks
8. Men are more burdened by interruptions in continuity in terms of their role and status in the community.

Implications

From one angle, this is a positive story about women’s achievements in overcoming the gender gap in employment. Yet, men’s reduced employment rates paint a picture of men who are alienated from meaningful community roles. Policies should support a strengthened role for men, engaging them in creating the future of tribal communities.

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