

Research-in-Brief

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The Status of Women in the States 2004 Overview

Women in the United States have achieved significant advances and are seeing important changes in their lives. Their access to political, economic, and social rights has improved greatly over the past 40 years. Nonetheless, they do not enjoy equality with men, and they lack many of the legal guarantees that would enable them to achieve it. Women across the nation would benefit from stronger enforcement of equal opportunity laws, greater political representation, adequate and affordable quality child care, stronger poverty reduction programs, stronger protection for their reproductive rights and health, greater access to health care, and other policies to improve their status. This Research-in-Brief summarizes the findings of the 2004 edition of *The Status of Women in the States*, a national overview report that presents and analyzes data for all 50 states.

The full report describes women's status nationally and discusses how measures of women's rights and equality vary among the states. It presents data for each state on a number of indicators of women's status. It also ranks each state for women's overall status in five areas: political participation, employment and earnings, social and economic autonomy, reproductive rights, and health and well-being. These rankings are based on composite indices of women's status for indicators in each of the five areas of their lives. The data used in the report come from a variety of sources, primarily government agencies, although other organizations also provided data. For a complete discussion of data sources and methodology, please see the full report.

The national report also gives special attention to the status of women of color in the United States, both nationally and by state. Large disparities still exist for many women of color in their social, political, economic, and health lives.

Many U.S. women are witnessing real improvements in their economic, political, and social status. But women have not achieved equality with men in any state, and throughout the country there are still many important problems and obstacles to their well-being.

WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES: WHAT'S PROMISING

In recent years, women's status has improved in many important ways:

- ◆ Between the fall of 1996 and October of 2004, the number of women governors jumped from one to nine, the number of women in the U.S. Senate grew from nine to 14, and the number of women in the U.S. House increased from 49 to 60.
- ◆ In every state, the wage gap between women's and men's earnings narrowed between 1989 and 2002. West Virginia showed the most improvement in the wage gap, improving from a gap of 41.4 percent to a gap of 27.4 percent.
- ◆ Between 1995 and 2002, women's poverty fell in all but eleven states; nationally, it dropped from 13.7 percent to 12.1 percent.
- ◆ Ten states improved their rankings substantially on the reproductive rights index between 1996 and 2004. Nevada saw the largest increase, jumping from 35th in 1996 to 13th in 2004.
- ◆ Women saw a decrease in their average annual mortality rate from suicide, from 4.4 deaths per 100,000 in 1998 to 4.0 deaths per 100,000 in 2001.
- ◆ The average annual mortality rate from breast cancer also decreased, from 28.8 per 100,000 in 1998 to 26.5 in 2001. African American women saw the greatest improvement in this rate, from 37.8 deaths per 100,000 in 1998 to 35.4 deaths per 100,000 in 2001.

WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES: WHAT'S DISAPPOINTING

Women's status has worsened or stagnated in some important areas:

- ◆ The proportion of women state legislators increased very little, from 20.8 percent to 22.5 percent, between 1996 and October 2004.
- ◆ The number of women of color serving in the U.S. Congress fell from 21 in 2002 to 18 as of October 2004. No women of color currently serve in the U.S. Senate and no woman of color has served as governor of any state.
- ◆ In eleven states, women's poverty actually increased between 1995 and 2002, and in another seven states, it fell by less than 1.0 percentage point (compared with 1.6 percentage points nationally).
- ◆ In 1996, 14 states had waiting periods for women seeking abortions; by 2004, 25 states did.
- ◆ After women's average annual incidence rate of AIDS decreased from 9.4 per 100,000 in 1997 to 8.7 per 100,000 in 2000, the rate increased in 2001 to 9.1 per 100,000.
- ◆ Racial disparities in AIDS remain wide: in 1999, the rate of AIDS incidence per 100,000 women was 49.0 for African American women, 14.9 for Hispanic women, and 5.0 for Native American women, compared with 1.4 for Asian American women and 2.3 for white women.

Political Participation

The political participation composite index combines four aspects of women's political status: voter registration, voter turnout, representation in elected office, and women's institutional resources. Ranks on these components vary widely among the states.

- ❖ Nationally, women are more likely to register to vote than men in every state but Pennsylvania. Hispanic and Asian American men and women are much less likely to vote than those of other races or ethnicities.
- ❖ Hawaii has the lowest voter registration rate for women in the country, at 51.0 percent. More than 40 percentage points divide Hawaii from the state with the highest rate, North Dakota, at 91.1 percent. North Dakota and several other top states for women's voter registration have either automatic or same-day registration.
- ❖ Women are more likely to vote than men in all but seven states: Hawaii, Kentucky, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota.
- ❖ The state with the highest rate of women's voter participation (Minnesota, 67.9 percent) and that with the lowest rate

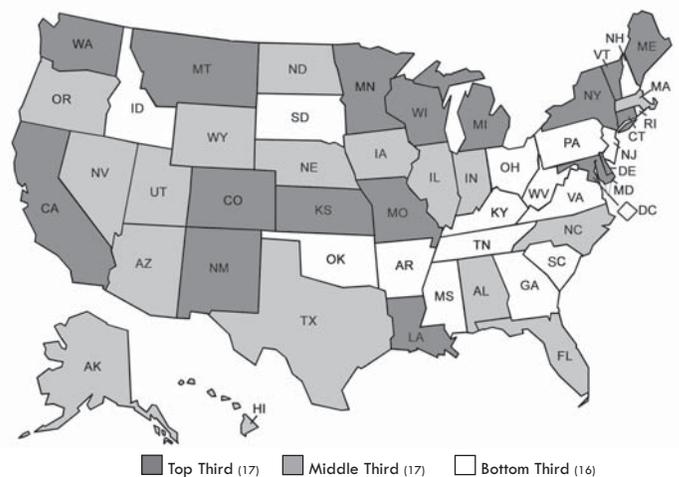
(Arizona, 41.4 percent) differ by more than 25 percentage points.

States also vary widely in their levels of women's political representation:

- ❖ A record nine states—Arizona, Delaware, Connecticut, Hawaii, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Montana, and Utah—had female governors as of 2004. In addition, Puerto Rico had its first female governor.
- ❖ In four states—California, Kansas, Maine, and Washington—women have held both Senate seats simultaneously.
- ❖ As of October 2004, five states—Delaware, Iowa, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and Vermont—had never sent a woman to either house of Congress.
- ❖ In state legislatures, the proportion of female representatives ranged from 9.4 percent in South Carolina to 36.7 percent in Washington. Women of color are only 4.1 percent of all state legislators.
- ❖ Four of the seven states where women vote at lower rates than men—Kentucky, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota—also rank in the bottom ten for women's representation in elected office.

Map 1 shows at a glance which states are in the top, middle, or bottom third of the nation overall on the women's political participation composite index.

MAP 1: Political Participation Composite Index



Note: For methodology and sources, see Appendix II in *The Status of Women in the States* full report.
Calculated by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Employment and Earnings

The employment and earnings composite index combines four indicators of women's economic status: women's earnings, the wage gap, women's representation in managerial and professional jobs, and women's participation in the labor force. Women's earnings and the wage gap vary substantially from state to state. Nonetheless, in every state, some gap exists.

- ❖ Women’s poverty rates vary widely among the states. While more than 20 percent of Mississippi women live in poverty, just 7 percent of women in New Hampshire do.
- ❖ Poverty rates in the United States also vary significantly by race. Nationally, more than 20 percent of Native American, African American, and Hispanic women live in poverty, compared with 9 percent of white women and just over 12 percent of Asian American women.
- ❖ Louisiana has the worst poverty rate for African American women (35.6 percent); Rhode Island has the worst poverty rate for Asian American women (26.2 percent) and Hispanic women (37.3 percent); and South Dakota has the worst poverty rate for Native American women (45.3 percent). West Virginia has the worst poverty rate for white women, at 17.3 percent.
- ❖ Six of the top ten states for women’s business ownership—California, Colorado, Hawaii, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington—are in the West. The area encompassing the District of Columbia, Virginia, and Maryland also does well on this indicator.
- ❖ States with the least women’s business ownership are clustered in the central part of the Southern region and in the Mountain states.

Map 3 shows how the states rank in the top, middle, or bottom third of the United States on the women’s social and economic autonomy composite index.

Reproductive Rights

The reproductive rights composite index incorporates each state’s scores on nine component indicators. The states’ scores on this composite vary widely, although women in the West and Northeast have the strongest access to reproductive health services.

- ❖ States such as Connecticut, Hawaii, New Jersey, and Vermont rank well on most components of the index and on the composite index as a whole.

- ❖ Other states, such as Mississippi, North Dakota, and South Dakota, rank poorly on the reproductive rights composite index as well as on each component of the index.
- ❖ Most states show a mixed commitment to reproductive rights, ranking well on some components and poorly on others.
- ❖ In all states, women’s reproductive rights vary by race and ethnicity, and disparities and discrimination in access to reproductive resources have seriously impaired the reproductive health of women of color. For example, when pregnant, women of color are less likely to use prenatal care. Among white women nationwide, 89 percent use prenatal care, compared with 84 percent of Asian American women, 76 percent of Hispanic women, 74 percent of African American women, and 69 percent of Native American women.

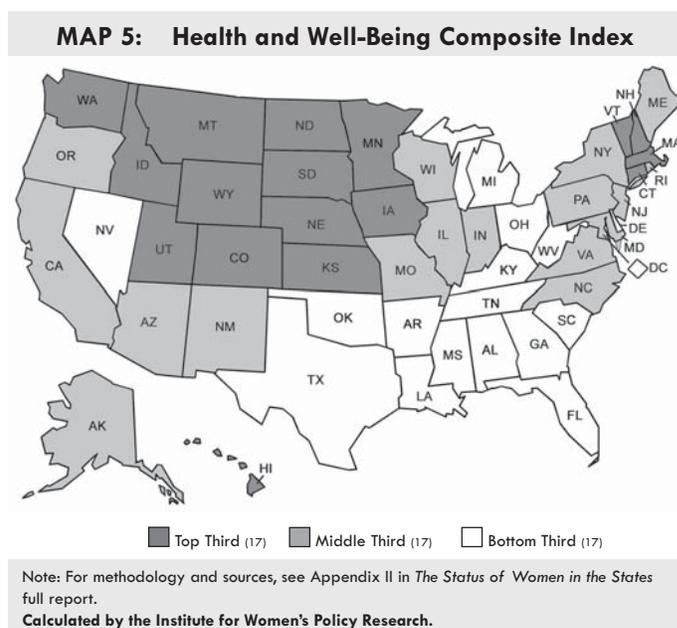
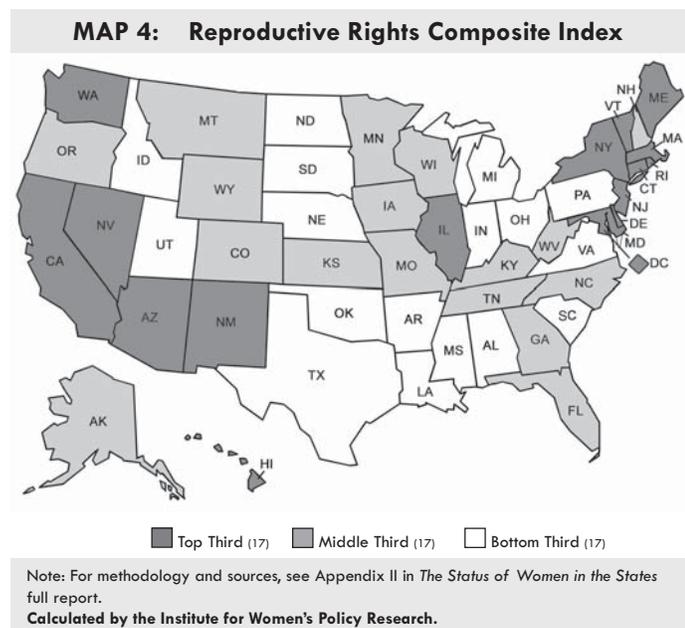
In all states, reproductive rights are continually being challenged, and women need to continue to defend and expand their access to reproductive choice.

Map 4 indicates whether each state is ranked in the top, middle, or bottom third of the country on the overall women’s reproductive rights composite index.

Health and Well-Being

The health and well-being composite index includes states’ scores on nine indicators of women’s health status as measured by mortality from and incidence of several diseases and health complications. States’ scores on this composite index vary widely as well.

- ❖ Overall, states in the Mountain region and parts of the Midwest rank well, while states in the South and other parts of the Midwest fare poorly.
- ❖ Women in Utah have particularly good health status when compared with women in other states. Utah scored in the top five of all states for six indicators: women’s lung cancer mortality, breast cancer mortality, incidence of diabetes,



incidence of chlamydia, incidence of AIDS, and health limitations on women's activities. Women's health overall is best in Utah and next best in Minnesota.

- ❖ In contrast, the District of Columbia ranks in the bottom five states on four of the indicators, and Kentucky does on three. Women's overall health status is the worst in the District of Columbia, followed by Kentucky.
- ❖ In all states, disparities in health status based on race and ethnicity are wide. African American women are much more likely to die of heart disease and breast cancer than white women. Racial and ethnic disparities in the incidence rates of AIDS among women are also large, with African American, Hispanic, and Native American women facing much higher rates than white or Asian American women.

Map 5 shows each state's rank—top, middle, or bottom third—on the overall composite index of women's health and well-being.

The Best and Worst States Overall

States usually differ considerably in their rankings and grades on the five composite indices used to measure women's status, making it challenging to determine the best and worst states for women. IWPR does not compute a single composite score combining information from all five indices. IWPR uses two criteria to select the best and worst states: the best states must 1) rank in the top ten on at least one composite index of women's status, and 2) never rank in the bottom half of all states.

CHART 1: The Best and Worst States for Women, 2004

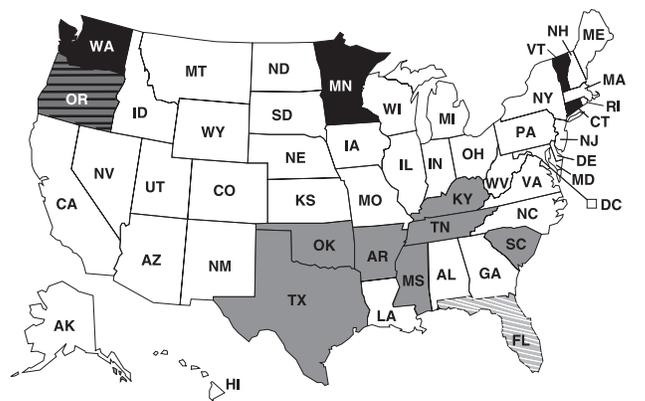
BEST STATES, 2004		WORST STATES, 2004	
1.	Vermont	51.	Mississippi
2.	Connecticut	50.	South Carolina
3.	Minnesota	49.	Kentucky
4.	Washington	47.	Arkansas
			Oklahoma (tied)
		46.	Tennessee
		45.	Texas
5.	Honorable Mention: Oregon	44.	Dishonorable Mention: Florida

Each of the best states for women appears in the top ten on at least one composite index; none appears below the midpoint of all states on any of the composite indices. Only four states qualified under these criteria. Each of the worst states appears in the bottom ten at least once and is below the midpoint of all states on all of the composite indices. Seven states met these criteria. For more on the methodology for ranking the states and for source information, see Appendix II in the full report, *The Status of Women in the States* (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2004).

Oregon received an honorable mention because it ranked in the top half of all states on all of the composite indices but never ranked in the top ten of all states. Florida received a dishonorable mention because it ranked below the midpoint of all states on each of the composite indices, yet never ranked in the bottom ten of all states for any composite.

Compiled by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

MAP 6: Best and Worst States for Women, 2004



■ Best States ▨ Honorable Mention ▩ Dishonorable Mention ■ Worst States

Note: For methodology and sources, see Appendix II in *The Status of Women in the States* full report.

Calculated by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Honorable mention is given to states that rank in the top half on all the composite indices. The worst states rank in the bottom ten on at least one composite index of women's status and never rank in the top half of all states. Dishonorable mention is given to states that rank in the bottom half of all composite indices.

Overall, the best states for women in 2004 are Vermont, Connecticut, Minnesota, and Washington (see Chart 1). Only these four states met the two criteria for being among the top states for women. Oregon receives an honorable mention. The worst state for women is Mississippi. Women's status is also low in South Carolina, Kentucky, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas (see Map 6). Florida receives a dishonorable mention.

Since 2002, there have been some interesting changes among the best states for women:

- ❖ Massachusetts, which was tied for the best state for women in 2002, is no longer among the top states at all. Between 2002 and 2004, Massachusetts' rank for women's political participation fell from 8th to 28th, largely because the state lost its woman governor. While Massachusetts is in the top ten on the other four composite indices, its low rank for political participation precludes it from being one of the best states for women.

- ❖ Alaska, Maine, and New Hampshire also dropped out of the top states for women. Alaska is no longer in the top half of all states for political participation (falling from 22nd to 26th) and health and well-being (falling from 13th to 27th). Maine fell below the midpoint of all states for women's employment and

earnings (from 17th to 27th) and for women's social and economic autonomy (from 24th to 28th). New Hampshire's ranking for political participation fell from 14th to 36th when it lost its woman governor, moving it out of the top states for women.

- ❖ Within the top states for women, Minnesota dropped from tied for first to third (after dropping from the top third on reproductive rights).
- ❖ Vermont moved from a tie for first to holding the top spot alone (after climbing into the top ten for women's health and well-being).
- ❖ Vermont, Connecticut, Minnesota, and Washington have consistently been good states for women, as they have ranked among the best states for women four times in a row (1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004).

There were also a few developments among the worst states for women:

- ❖ South Carolina re-joined the ranks of the worst states for women in 2004 after moving out of the worst states in 2002. In 2004, South Carolina dropped into the bottom ten of all states for women's political participation (42nd, from 40th in 2002), employment and earnings (42nd, from 30th in 2002), and health and well-being (44th, from 40th in 2002).
- ❖ Texas also joined the worst states for women in 2004, after falling from 24th to 29th for women's employment and earnings. Texas is now also in the bottom ten of all states for women's social and economic autonomy (at 44th, falling from 40th).

- ❖ Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Indiana all moved out of the worst states for women in 2004. Alabama now ranks in the top half of all states (at 24th) for women's political participation. Pennsylvania jumped from a ranking of 36th to 21st for women's employment and earnings and from 29th to 25th for women's health and well-being. Florida remains in the bottom half of all states on all five indicators, and so earns a dishonorable mention, although it no longer ranks in the bottom ten of all states for women's health and well-being. Indiana improved its ranking for women's political participation from 30th to 23rd.
- ❖ Between 2002 and 2004, Tennessee advanced from 50th to 46th overall, after leaving the bottom ten states for both women's employment and earnings and women's health and well-being.
- ❖ Mississippi was the worst state for women for the fourth time in a row (1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004).

Throughout the country, women still face significant problems that demand attention from policymakers, women's advocates, and researchers concerned with women's status. The Institute for Women's Policy Research's series on *The Status of Women in the States* is designed to help pinpoint the barriers that continue to disadvantage women in each state.

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ABOUT THIS RESEARCH-IN-BRIEF

This Research-in-Brief is part of *The Status of Women in the States* report series released in 2004. This series includes *Women's Economic Status in the States: Wide Disparities by Race, Ethnicity, and Region*; *The Status of Early Care and Education in the States* and two accompanying state-level analyses of Wisconsin and New Mexico; 12 state-level *Status of Women* reports; and the national report summarized here.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S POLICY RESEARCH

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) is a scientific research organization dedicated to informing and stimulating the debate on public policy issues of critical importance to women and their families. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family, health and safety, and women's civic and political participation.

The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and families and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR, an independent, nonprofit, research organization, also works in affiliation with the graduate programs in public policy and women's studies at The George Washington University.

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