

## BEFORE THE "SHE-CESSION": A PRE-PANDEMIC SNAPSHOT SHOWS MORE WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE THAN EVER

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*Prior to COVID-19, a look at women's economic standing across the United States reveals more women in the labor force than ever and a narrowing gender gap.*

### Research Highlights

- This brief provides insights on the economic standing of women across all 50 states and the District of Columbia for 2019, since the last [Employment and Earnings Index update](#).
- Part of the [Status of Women in the States](#) project, the Employment and Earnings Index provides state-by-state rankings on women's earnings, the gender wage gap, women's participation in the labor force, and women's representation in managerial and professional occupations.
- The data indicates that, in 2019, more women were in the labor force than ever before, the gender wage gap narrowed, and women continued to enter managerial and professional occupations at growing rates. This provides an important baseline to measure the effect of the pandemic-fueled "she-cession" on women's employment and earnings.
- **The District of Columbia held on to the top overall ranking on the Index, maintaining its A grade.** The District of Columbia ranks first (#1) in three of the four Employment and Earnings indicators: women's earnings, the percent of women in the labor force, and the percent of all employed women in managerial and professional occupations. Maryland and Massachusetts rank second and third overall, maintaining B+ grades.
- **West Virginia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Wyoming rank at the bottom of the Index.** Each of these states earned an F grade. In the 2018 index, Mississippi and West Virginia also earned F grades, while Alabama's grade fell from a D- to an F and Wyoming's grade fell from a C+ to an F.



The “she-cession” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has created economic instability for women across the United States.<sup>1</sup> Yet, before the COVID-19 pandemic, women’s employment and earnings were improving nationwide. It is important to track trends in women’s employment and earnings prior to the pandemic to have a full sense of both progress made and the continued barriers that women face. The patterns in women’s pre-pandemic employment and earnings will provide a baseline by which to measure the effect of the “she-cession” on women’s employment and earnings. This brief, which presents 2019 data, provides that important baseline.

This policy brief updates the Employment and Earnings Index of the [\*Status of Women in the States\*](#), presenting data on the economic standing of women across the United States in 2019. The data show that more women than ever were in the labor force, the gender wage gap had decreased, and a growing number of women were entering managerial and professional occupations. However, not all women in the United States have the same employment opportunities; economic security varies depending on the state where one lives.

This brief first presents states’ overall rankings on the Index and then discusses trends on the component indicators among the best and worst ranked states. The brief concludes with state- and national-level policy recommendations aimed at improving women’s economic progress.

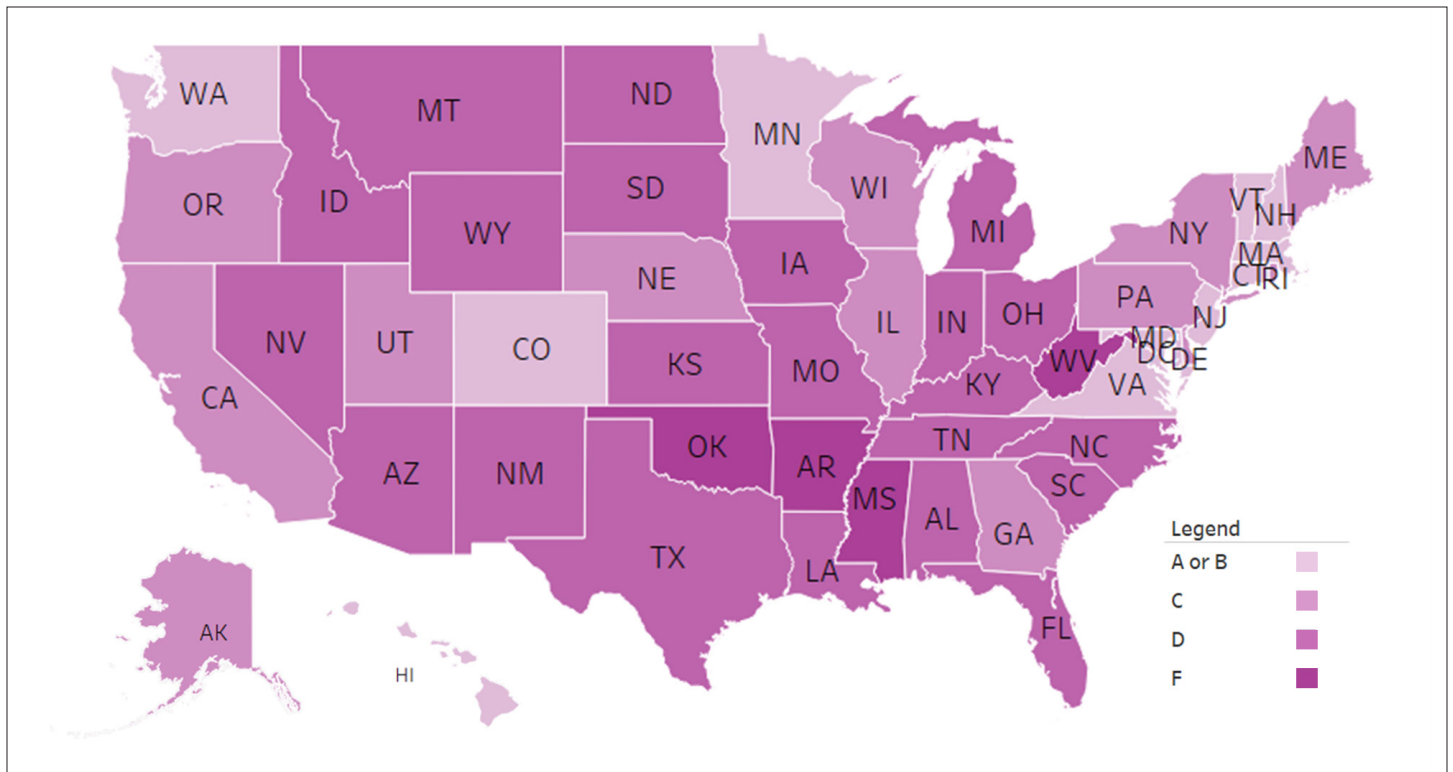
### **States’ Overall Rankings on the Index**

The rankings and grades on the Status of Women in the States Employment and Earnings Index relies on a combination of states’ performance on four indicators: (1) women’s earnings, (2) the gender wage gap, (3) women’s labor force participation, and (4) women’s representation in managerial and professional occupations.

**Map 1** shows the range of grades that states have earned on the Employment and Earnings Index. It is important to note that states are graded on an ideal score. Only the District of Columbia receives an A grade, and 17 states receive a grade in the B range. Almost one-third of states (16 of 51) receive a D or F, meaning they have a significant amount of work to do to improve on the Index.

**Appendix A** provides each state’s overall ranks and scores, along with the data and rankings for each of the component indicators of women’s earnings, the gender wage gap, women’s labor force participation, and women’s representation in managerial and professional occupations.

## Map 1. How the States Measure Up: Employment and Earnings Index, 2019



Note: For composite methodology and sources, go to <https://statusofwomensdata.org/explore-the-data/methodology>.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 10.0).

**Table 1. Best and Worst States on Women's Employment and Earnings, 2019**

Best	Rank	Grade	Worst	Rank	Grade
District of Columbia	1	<b>A</b>	Louisiana/Oklahoma	46	<b>D-</b>
Maryland	2	<b>B+</b>	Wyoming	48	<b>F</b>
Massachusetts	3	<b>B+</b>	Alabama	49	<b>F</b>
Connecticut	4	<b>B+</b>	Mississippi	50	<b>F</b>
New York/Vermont	5	<b>B+</b>	West Virginia	51	<b>F</b>

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 10.0).

### Best States for Women: Employment and Earnings

The District of Columbia, Maryland, and Massachusetts rank first, second, and third on the Employment and Earnings Index, a trend that has remained constant in the previous two Index calculations (2018 and 2015). The District of Columbia, Maryland, and Massachusetts rank high on at least three of the four component indicators, with DC ranking first on all but the wage gap indicator. Connecticut and New York (ranked #4 and #5, respectively) also maintain their rankings from the 2018 Index. Vermont has made considerable improvements in women's Employment and Earnings, moving from #12 in 2018 to #5, now tied with New York.

The best states for women on the four Employment and Earnings indicators include:

- **Women's Earnings:** Full-time, year-round women workers in the District of Columbia have the highest earnings of all 50 states and DC, where median annual earnings are \$72,000. Maryland and Massachusetts are tied for second; median earnings for women are \$56,000 in both states. However, women's earnings in Maryland and Massachusetts are over \$15,000 below women's median earnings in DC. Women in these three states also had the highest annual earnings in the 2018 Index.
- **Gender Wage Gap:** The wage gap between women and men is narrowest in Vermont, California, Maryland, and Nevada – where women earn 93 percent, 89.3 percent, 88.9 percent, and 88.9 percent of what men earn in each state, respectively. Since the Employment and Earnings Index was last calculated in 2018, Vermont closed the wage gap by almost 10 percentage points. Alaska and Nevada also made considerable progress on this indicator, closing the wage gap between women and men by 9.4 and 8.6 percentage points, respectively.
- **Women's Labor Force Participation:** The District of Columbia, North Dakota, and Minnesota have the highest shares of women in the labor force at 68.7 percent, 66.2 percent, and 65.6 percent, respectively. In the 2018 Index, these states also held the top three slots in women's labor force participation. While North Dakota and Minnesota fare well on women's labor force participation, they do not fall within the top tier for the other component indicators.
- **Women's Representation in Managerial and Professional Occupations:** The same three states that received the top overall rankings and grades on the Index – the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Massachusetts – have the largest shares of women in managerial and professional occupations, at 69.8 percent, 52.5 percent, and 52.4 percent, respectively. DC, Maryland, and Massachusetts also held the top three rankings for the share of women in managerial and professional occupations in the 2018 Index. Since then, these three states increased the share of women in managerial and professional occupations by 9.1, 4.7, and 3.0 percentage points, respectively.

### **Worst States for Women: Employment and Earnings**

Mississippi, West Virginia, Alabama, and Wyoming rank as the worst states for women on the Employment and Earnings Index. These four states perform poorly on each of the component indicators, ranking in the bottom third of states in each area. While Mississippi, West Virginia, and Alabama also ranked low on the Index in 2018, Wyoming dropped from #21 to #48 in the overall rankings, falling from a C+ to an F grade. This drastic change in Wyoming's performance reflects their decline on two indicators (women's median annual earnings and the gender wage gap) and a lack of progress on the remaining two indicators (women's labor force participation and women's representation in managerial and professional occupations).

The worst states for women on the four Employment and Earnings indicators include:

- **Women's Earnings:** Women working full-time, year-round in Mississippi (\$33,000), Arkansas (\$35,000), West Virginia (\$35,000), and Oklahoma (\$36,000) have the lowest earnings in the United States. These states also have consistently low rankings for almost every component indicator.
- **Gender Wage Gap:** Women in Wyoming, Utah, and Oklahoma face the widest wage gaps and the lowest earnings ratios as compared to men, at 65.4 percent, 70.2 percent, and 72.0 percent, respectively. Wyoming's gender wage gap increased substantially, from 80 percent in the 2018 Index to 65.4 percent. This drastic change places Wyoming at the bottom of the index (ranking 51st), a substantial change from the 2018 Index, when Wyoming ranked 21st on this indicator. In contrast, Utah and Oklahoma maintained the low rankings on the wage gap indicator that they had in 2018.
- **Women's Labor Force Participation:** The share of women in the workforce is lowest in West Virginia, Alabama, and Mississippi, at 49.6 percent, 52.6 percent, and 53.5 percent, respectively. These three states maintain the low rankings they had on this indicator in 2018.
- **Women's Representation in Managerial and Professional Occupations:** Women in Nevada, Idaho, and Indiana are least likely to work in managerial and professional occupations, with only 33.6 percent, 38.3 percent, and 39 percent of women in those roles, respectively. These states, while increasing the share of women in managerial and professional occupations, are doing so at a much slower rate than other states, reflecting their lack of improvement in the rankings since the 2018 update.

## Policy Recommendations

Women across the United States made progress in terms of employment and earnings in recent years, but still faced inequities that prevented them from reaching their full potential or achieving economic security. While some states have been working to increase opportunities for women and are actively working to tackle challenges—such as the gender wage gap—with targeted policies, other states have lagged. The states that fare poorly on the Employment and Earnings Index have made little to no progress over recent years. In a few cases, the performance of some states has worsened. The Employment and Earnings Index highlights the need to center women and families in economic programs and policymaking, particularly as the country transitions to recovery from the pandemic.

The “she-cession” caused by COVID-19, combined with existing challenges faced by working women and families prior to the pandemic, shows the need for meaningful policy changes to ensure economic security for all women and families. Every state is different, both in terms of where they stand on women's employment and earnings and in the policies and programs designed to improve economic security for women. Given this variation, the policy recommendations below are broad, providing ideas for both national- and state-level policymakers to improve women's economic security across the United States.

Policymakers, employers, and advocates can support policies to reduce barriers to equity in women's employment and earnings, including:

- **Establish a national child-care system:** A national child-care system would meet the needs of all families, raise wages for workers, and provide affordable, high-quality child care for every household, regardless of the age of the child or household income. Early-care educators should also receive increases in compensation, loan forgiveness options, and opportunities for professional development.
- **Rebuild the social safety net:** Supporting workers and families requires providing income supports and short- and long-term investments in safety net programs such as Unemployment Insurance (UI), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Specifically, economic policies should include expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), expanding access to programs for workers and vulnerable families, and increasing investments for education and training for women workers.
- **Invest in the public sector and provide assistance to states:** The federal government should prioritize direct assistance to states. States' loss of revenue, which was particularly acute during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the need of extra resources to combat the spread of infection, often triggered layoffs and furloughs for many public sector workers. Providing emergency economic assistance directly to states protects public-sector workers and makes up for revenue loss.
- **Improve job quality and labor standards:** Increasing the federal and state minimum wage, providing paid sick and family medical leave, and creating employer-sponsored care subsidy programs increases wages and provides job security for workers and families. Investing in jobs and social infrastructure can ensure the safety and security of the most vulnerable communities. These benefits are crucial to help women remain and advance in the workforce.
- **Invest in targeted programs for gender equity:** Legislation that aims to reduce pay inequity for all women and to remove restrictions on workers' rights to bargain collectively over their wages and conditions leads more equitable practices and experiences in the workforce. Additionally, gender equity in the workplace can be advanced by advocating for employers to promote paid internships, training, apprenticeships, and recruitment for women in high-growth occupations with low female participation—occupations such as construction, transportation, and in STEM fields.
- **Support women business owners:** Investments in businesses owned by women or people of color—providing resources or technical assistance to help identify funding opportunities—allows women and women of color to grow or start their own businesses. Addressing the lack of financing options for businesses owned by women and people of color could mitigate some of the risk of business ownership, while encouraging women to pursue business ownership as a path to economic security.

## Appendix A. Employment and Earnings Composite Index, 2019

State	Composite Index			Median Annual Earnings for Women Employed Full-Time, Year-Round		Earnings Ratio Between Women and Men Employed Full-Time, Year-Round		Percent of Women in the Labor Force		Percent of All Employed Women in Managerial and Professional Occupations	
	Score	Rank	Grade	Dollars	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
Alabama	3.56	49	F	\$36,200	47	72.4%	48	52.6%	50	40.8%	43
Alaska	4.31	8	B	\$50,000	7	87.7%	6	60.2%	21	45.9%	13
Arizona	3.80	36	D+	\$40,000	24	80.0%	20	55.5%	43	41.2%	40
Arkansas	3.66	45	D-	\$35,000	49	80.5%	18	54.3%	47	41.1%	42
California	4.24	14	B	\$50,000	7	89.3%	2	58.2%	35	43.6%	25
Colorado	4.28	10	B	\$48,000	11	80.0%	20	63.3%	8	48.3%	6
Connecticut	4.48	4	B+	\$55,000	4	83.3%	11	62.0%	13	49.1%	4
Delaware	4.17	16	B-	\$47,000	15	83.9%	10	58.1%	36	46.2%	12
District of Columbia	5.43	1	A	\$72,000	1	80.9%	17	68.7%	1	69.8%	1
Florida	3.73	41	D	\$37,000	41	82.2%	13	55.1%	44	40.3%	46
Georgia	3.91	27	C	\$40,000	24	80.0%	20	58.8%	28	43.7%	23
Hawaii	4.11	18	B-	\$46,000	17	88.5%	5	60.9%	19	40.1%	47
Idaho	3.67	44	D-	\$37,000	41	76.0%	44	58.8%	28	38.3%	50
Illinois	4.06	19	C+	\$45,000	18	77.6%	39	61.0%	18	44.7%	20
Indiana	3.72	42	D	\$38,000	38	76.0%	42	59.4%	25	39.0%	49
Iowa	3.90	28	C	\$40,000	24	77.7%	38	63.1%	9	41.5%	38
Kansas	3.96	24	C+	\$40,000	24	80.0%	20	61.1%	17	44.3%	21
Kentucky	3.83	32	C-	\$39,000	36	81.3%	16	55.0%	46	43.4%	26
Louisiana	3.65	46	D-	\$37,000	41	74.0%	46	55.1%	44	41.2%	40
Maine	3.94	26	C+	\$40,000	24	80.0%	20	58.7%	30	45.3%	18
Maryland	4.67	2	B+	\$56,000	2	88.9%	3	63.7%	7	52.5%	2
Massachusetts	4.56	3	B+	\$56,000	2	80.0%	20	63.8%	6	52.4%	3
Michigan	3.78	37	D+	\$40,400	23	76.2%	41	57.5%	39	40.7%	44
Minnesota	4.30	9	B	\$48,000	11	80.0%	20	65.6%	3	47.4%	10
Mississippi	3.54	50	F	\$33,000	51	77.8%	37	53.5%	49	39.9%	48
Missouri	3.90	28	C	\$40,000	24	80.0%	20	58.6%	32	43.4%	26
Montana	3.78	37	D+	\$38,000	38	76.0%	42	59.6%	23	41.7%	37
Nebraska	4.05	20	C+	\$40,000	24	80.0%	20	64.5%	4	45.6%	15
Nevada	3.78	37	D+	\$40,000	24	88.9%	3	58.1%	36	33.6%	51
New Hampshire	4.28	10	B	\$48,900	10	81.5%	14	62.0%	13	47.6%	9
New Jersey	4.35	7	B+	\$53,000	5	80.3%	19	60.8%	20	48.1%	7
New Mexico	3.70	43	D	\$37,000	41	77.1%	40	53.8%	48	42.7%	30
New York	4.38	5	B+	\$52,000	6	86.7%	7	59.6%	23	47.9%	8
North Carolina	3.95	25	C+	\$40,000	24	84.7%	9	57.6%	38	44.0%	22
North Dakota	4.15	17	B-	\$42,000	21	82.4%	12	66.2%	2	45.6%	15

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	Composite Index			Median Annual Earnings for Women Employed Full-Time, Year-Round		Earnings Ratio Between Women and Men Employed Full-Time, Year-Round		Percent of Women in the Labor Force		Percent of All Employed Women in Managerial and Professional Occupations	
Ohio	3.87	30	C-	\$40,000	24	78.4%	34	59.1%	26	42.5%	31
Oklahoma	3.65	46	D-	\$36,000	48	72.0%	49	56.0%	41	42.8%	29
Oregon	4.00	21	C+	\$44,000	19	80.0%	20	58.6%	32	43.7%	23
Pennsylvania	4.00	21	C+	\$43,400	20	78.9%	33	58.7%	30	44.8%	19
Rhode Island	4.25	13	B	\$48,000	11	85.7%	8	61.2%	16	45.7%	14
South Carolina	3.75	40	D	\$38,000	38	78.4%	35	55.6%	42	42.2%	33
South Dakota	3.82	33	C-	\$37,000	41	74.0%	46	64.1%	5	42.3%	32
Tennessee	3.81	34	C-	\$38,300	37	81.5%	15	57.2%	40	41.4%	39
Texas	3.87	30	C-	\$40,000	24	80.0%	20	58.5%	34	42.0%	35
Utah	3.81	34	C-	\$40,000	24	70.2%	50	62.3%	12	42.0%	35
Vermont	4.38	5	B+	\$46,500	16	93.0%	1	62.9%	10	47.4%	10
Virginia	4.26	12	B	\$48,000	11	80.0%	20	62.0%	13	48.6%	5
Washington	4.18	15	B-	\$50,000	7	78.1%	36	59.7%	22	45.6%	15
West Virginia	3.53	51	F	\$35,000	49	74.3%	45	49.6%	51	42.1%	34
Wisconsin	4.00	21	C+	\$42,000	21	79.2%	32	62.9%	10	43.1%	28
Wyoming	3.58	48	F	\$36,600	46	65.4%	51	59.0%	27	40.5%	45
United States				\$43,000		81.1%		58.8%		44.0%	

Note: Aged 16 years and older.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 10.0).

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Cover photo: monkeybusinessimages

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the "she-cession", see C. Nicole Mason, Andrea Flynn, and Shengwei Sun, *Build(ing) the Future: Bold Policies for a Gender-Equitable Recovery*, Report, IWPR #C491 (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020); Ariane Hegewisch and Eve Mefferd, *Women and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Five Charts and a Table Tracking the 2020 "She-Cession" by Race and Gender*, Quick Figure, IWPR #Q094 (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021); and Ariane Hegewisch and Eve Mefferd, *Despite Record Job Growth in March 2021 Gender Gap in Economic Recovery Widened*, Quick Figure, IWPR #Q095 (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021).



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