

# Research-in-Brief

IWPR# R250

## The Status of Women in the States Overview

This Research-in-Brief is based on selected findings from *The Status of Women in the States* report, a definitive state-wide analysis on women's socio-economic and political circumstances.

Women in the United States have achieved great advances and are seeing important changes in their lives. Their access to political, economic, and social rights has improved greatly over the past 20 years. Nonetheless, they do not enjoy equality with men, and they lack many of the legal guarantees that would allow them to achieve it. Women across the nation would benefit from stronger enforcement of equal opportunity laws, greater political representation, adequate and affordable child care, stronger poverty reduction programs, and other policies to improve their status.

This report describes how measures of women's rights and equality vary among the states. It presents data for each state on 30 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.

Many U.S. women are witnessing real improvements in their economic, political, and social status. These advances are evident in some relatively high rankings for women's status in some states. 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.

### 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. These components vary widely among the states.

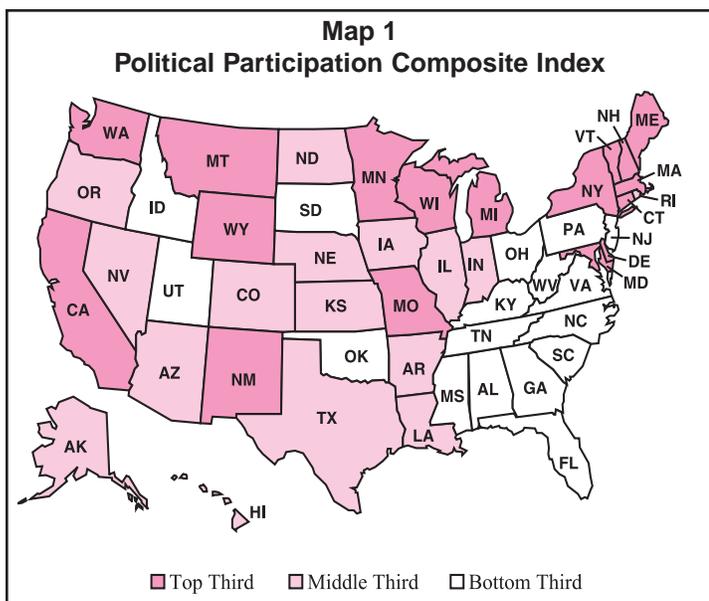
- ♦Nationally, women are more likely than men to register to vote in every state but Pennsylvania.
- ♦Hawaii has the lowest registration rate for women in the country, 51.0 percent. More than 40 percentage points divide Hawaii from the state with the highest rate, North Dakota, at 91.1 percent. North

### Women in the United States: What's Promising

- ♦Between the fall of 1996 and fall of 2002, the number of women governors jumped from one to five, the number of women in the U.S. Senate grew from nine to 13, and the number of women in the U.S. House increased from 49 to 60.
- ♦In all but four states, the wage ratio between women's and men's earnings rose between 1989 and 1999.
- ♦Between 1995 and 1999, women's poverty fell in all but eight states; nationally, it dropped from 13.7 percent to 12.0 percent.
- ♦Between 1996 and 2002, 19 states adopted laws mandating comprehensive coverage for contraceptives by health insurance companies.
- ♦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.
- ♦Between 1998 and 2002, 20 states introduced legislation that would expand unemployment insurance coverage to cover parental leave (although none passed it).

### Women in the United States: What's Disappointing

- ♦The proportion of women state legislators grew only slightly, from 20.8 percent to 22.6 percent, between 1996 and 2002, and in a third of all states women's political representation dropped.
- ♦In 25 states where the ratio of women's to men's earnings increased between 1989 and 1999, it did so in part because men's earnings fell (in constant dollars).
- ♦In eight states, women's poverty actually increased between 1995 and 1999, and in another nine states, it fell by less than 1.0 percentage point (compared with 1.7 percentage points nationally).
- ♦In 1996, 14 states had waiting periods for women seeking abortions; by 2002, 22 states did.
- ♦Between 1997 and 2000, rates of chlamydia grew from 336 to 404 per 100,000 women.
- ♦Since 1996, an additional nine states have implemented family caps, denying benefits to children conceived or born while a mother is receiving welfare.



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 almost 27 percentage points.

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

- ♦ In four states—California, Kansas, Maine, and Washington—women have held both Senate seats simultaneously.
- ♦ As of October 2002, six other states—Alaska, 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 ranges from 7.9 percent in Alabama to 38.8 percent in Washington.
- ♦ Four of the states where women vote at lower rates than men—Kentucky, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania—also rank in the bottom ten for women’s representation.

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. The District of Columbia is omitted from this ranking.

### Employment and Earnings

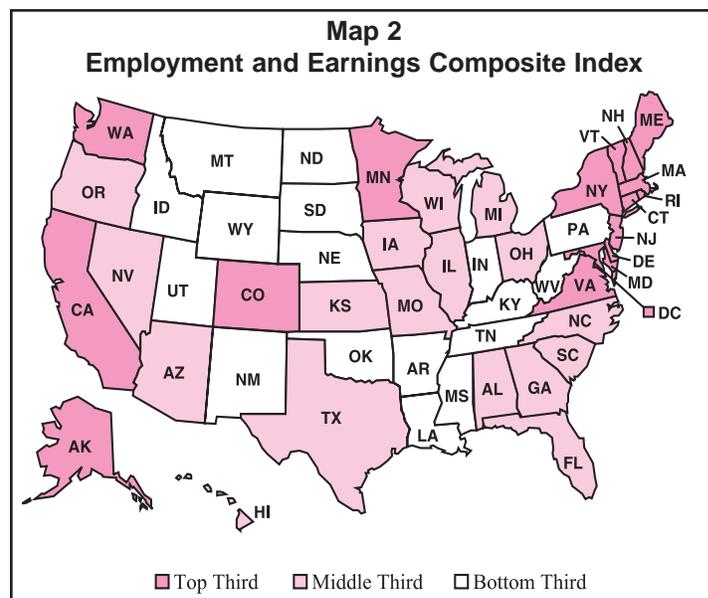
The employment and earnings composite index combines four indicators of women’s economic status: women’s earnings, the wage gap, women’s representation in managerial and professional jobs, and women’s participation in the labor force. Women’s

earnings and the wage gap vary substantially from state to state. Nonetheless, in every state, some gap exists.

- ♦ Earnings tend to be higher in the West, the Northeast, and parts of the Midwest, while they are lower in much of the Southeast and in the Mountain states.
- ♦ Women in the District of Columbia earn the most and come the closest to earnings equality with men. D.C. women earn 89.2 percent of men’s earnings for full-time, year-round work.
- ♦ In contrast, women in Wyoming have the least equity with men. They earn only 64.4 percent of men’s wages.
- ♦ Nationally, about 32 percent of all women workers are in professional and managerial occupations. The percent of women in these fields, however, is much larger in some states than in others.
- ♦ As a share of all women workers, women in the District of Columbia are almost twice as likely to work in managerial and professional positions as women in Idaho, at 48.0 percent versus 26.1 percent.
- ♦ The wage gap, women’s earnings, and women’s representation in professional and managerial occupations are closely related in many states. Alaska, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Minnesota all score in the top ten on all three indicators. Louisiana, Mississippi, and Wyoming are in the bottom ten on all three.

Trends are slightly different for the fourth component of this index, women’s labor force participation. The percentage of women in the labor force is high in many states among the Mountain and northern Midwestern regions, as well as a few Northeastern states.

Map 2 shows how states fall in the top, middle, or bottom third of the nation on the women’s employment and earnings composite index.



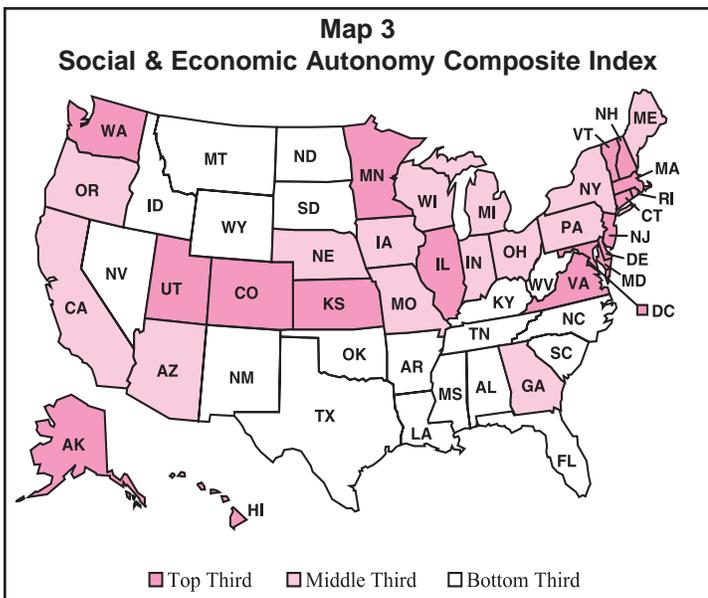
### Social and Economic Autonomy

The social and economic autonomy composite index combines four indicators of women’s ability to exercise control over their social and economic lives: health insurance, college education, business ownership, and poverty rates. Overall, more women earn college degrees and start their own businesses today than ever before. However, many women lack health insurance, and more women than men live in poverty.

In general, women in the Northeast, the West, and parts of the Midwest are the most likely to have a college degree and to own a business. Women in the Northeast and the Midwest are also more likely to have health insurance and to live above the poverty line.

- ◆ Four states—Connecticut, Maryland, Minnesota, and New Hampshire—are among the top third for three indicators: the percent of women with four-year college degrees, with health insurance, and above the poverty line.
- ◆ Four Southeastern states—Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia—are in the bottom third for all three indicators.
- ◆ Poverty rates in the United States vary particularly widely for women. While almost 20 percent of Louisiana women live in poverty, just 7 percent of New Hampshire women do.
- ◆ 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 middle part of the Southern region of the country and in the Mountain states.

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



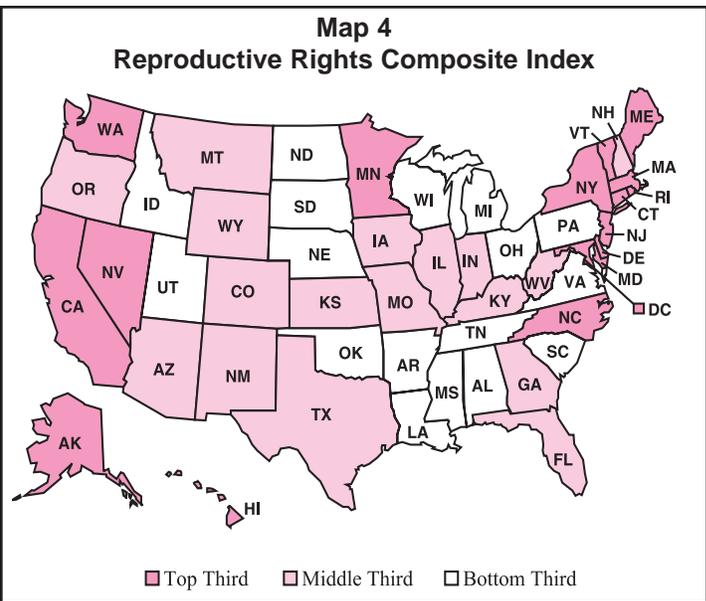
### Reproductive Rights

The reproductive rights composite index incorporates each state’s scores on nine component indicators. The states’ scores on this composite vary widely.

- ◆ States such as Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, 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 composite index as well as on each component of the index.
- ◆ Most states show a more mixed commitment to reproductive rights, ranking well on some components and poorly on others.

In all states, however, 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

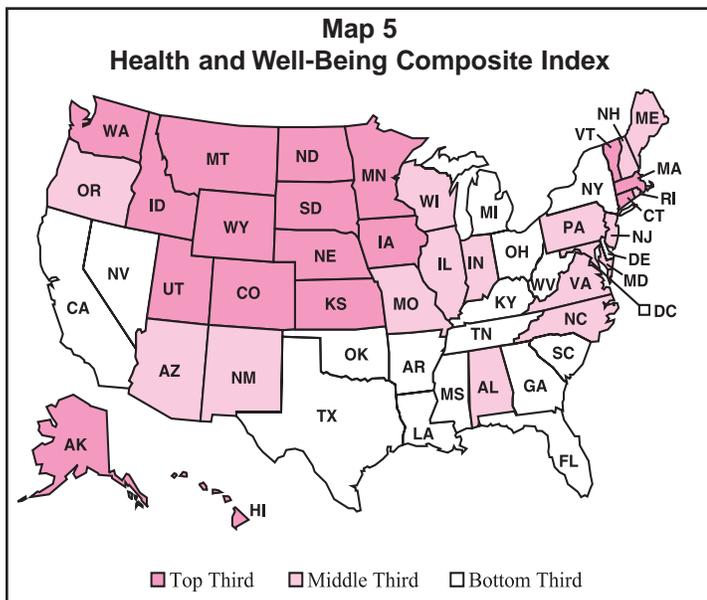
The health and well-being composite index includes states’ scores on nine indicators of women’s health status. States’ scores on this composite index vary widely as well.

- ◆ Overall, states in the Mountain region and parts of the Midwest rank well, while states in the South and other parts of the Midwest rank poorly.
- ◆ Women in Utah and Hawaii have particularly good health status when compared with women in other states. Both states ranked in the top five on four indicators. Women’s health overall is best in Utah and next best in Hawaii.

◆ 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.

◆ 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, and to have AIDS, than white 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

Overall, the best states for women are Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Vermont (see Chart 1 and Map 6). Women in Connecticut and Washington also fare well, followed by women in Alaska. Maine and New Hampshire round out the best states for women. Only these eight states meet the two criteria for being among the top states for women: 1) ranking in the top ten on at least one composite index of women's status, and 2) never appearing in the bottom half of all states.

In contrast, the worst state for women is Mississippi. Women's status is also low in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Oklahoma, followed by Arkansas, Alabama, and Pennsylvania. Florida and Indiana round out the ten worst states for women. Each of these states ranks in the bottom ten on at least one composite index of women's status and never appears in the top half of all states.

Since 2000, there have been some interesting changes among the best states for women:

◆ Massachusetts, which was not among the top states for women in 2000, is now tied for first with Minnesota and Vermont.

Between 2000 and 2002, Massachusetts improved its rank for women's political participation from the bottom half of the states, at 27th, to eighth, in part because it elected a woman lieutenant governor who then became governor. Its rank for reproductive rights also improved, from 14th to eighth. It is now in the top ten on all five composite indices except women's health and well-being, for which it is in the top third (at 16th).

◆ Maine is also a new member of the top states for women, tied at seventh. Between 2000 and 2002, Maine jumped into the top half of all states, from 26th to second, for women's employment and earnings. It moved into the top third, from 21st to 13th, for women's reproductive rights. It is also in the top ten for women's political participation, at second (in 2000 it was first).

◆ Colorado and Hawaii dropped out of the top states for women. Colorado is no longer in the top half of all states for political participation (falling from 16th to 26th) and reproductive rights (falling from 25th to 31st). Hawaii fell below the midpoint of all states (from 16th to 27th) for women's employment and earnings, primarily because of a drop from second to 27th in the country for the ratio of women's to men's earnings.

◆ Within the top states for women, New Hampshire dropped from fifth to tie for seventh (after dropping from the top ten on political participation and from the top third on reproductive rights).

◆ Connecticut dropped from first to fourth (after falling from the top ten into the top third for women's political participation and health and well-being).

◆ Minnesota jumped from fifth to first (after climbing into the top ten for women's social and economic autonomy and health and well-being). The state also moved into the top third for women's reproductive rights.

◆ Alaska climbed from eighth to sixth (after moving into the top third for women's reproductive rights and health and well-being).

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

◆ Indiana joined the ranks of the worst states for women for the first time. In 2000, Indiana was ranked above the midpoint of all states for political participation and for health and well-being, but by 2002 the state had dropped to 30th and 29th, respectively, on these indices. It ranks in the bottom ten for women's employment and earnings (at 45th).

◆ Between 2000 and 2002, Alabama advanced from 49th to 46th overall, after leaving the bottom ten for women's political participation and rising to the middle third for employment and earnings, but joining the bottom ten for women's reproductive rights.

◆ Oklahoma dropped from 45th to 48th after joining the bottom ten states for women's political participation.

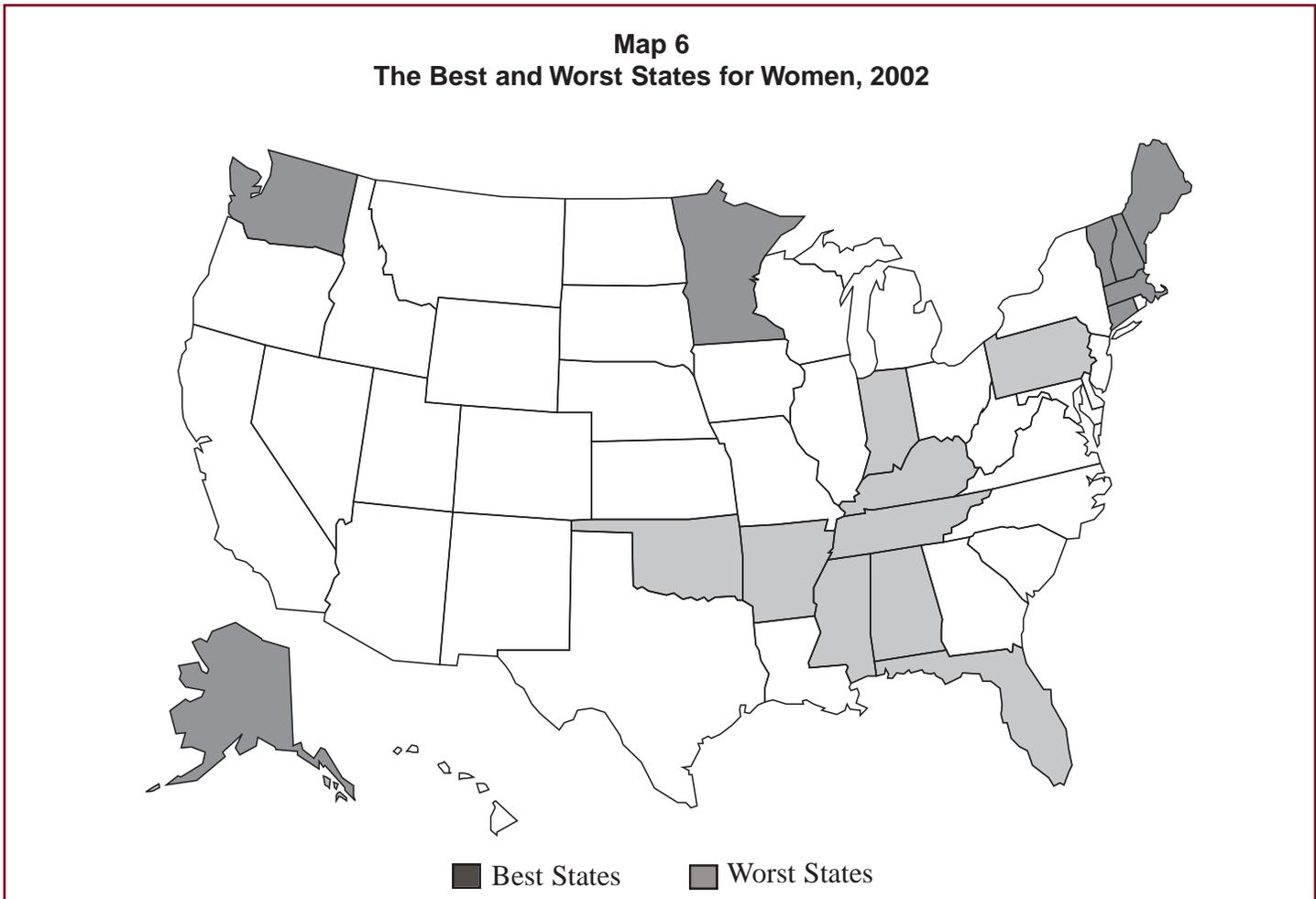
◆ Kentucky dropped by three places after falling into the bottom ten for women's employment and earnings.

- ♦Mississippi was the worst state for women for the third time in a row (1998, 2000, and 2002).
- ♦Throughout the country, women still face significant problems that demand attention from policymakers, women’s advocates, and researchers concerned with women’s status. This report is designed to help identify remaining barriers to women’s equality in each state.

*The Status of Women in the States* is part of an ongoing research project conducted by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) to measure and track the status of women in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Primarily funded by the Ford Foundation, with additional funding from state and local foundations and organizations, this project intends to improve the ability of advocates and policymakers at the state level to address women’s issues. Funding from the Rockefeller Family Fund, the Open Society Institute, and the Marjorie Cook Family Foundation also supports the project. The first three sets of reports were released in 1996, 1998, and 2000, consisting of 33 state reports and three national reports. The 2002 series includes nine states as well as an update of the national report. The 2002 National Report provides an overview of women’s status across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. See IWPR’s website ([www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org)) for more information.

<b>Chart 1</b>			
<b>The Best and Worst States for Women, 2002</b>			
<b>Best States, 2002</b>		<b>Worst States, 2002</b>	
1.	Massachusetts	51.	Mississippi
	Minnesota	50.	Tennessee
	Vermont (all tied)	49.	Kentucky
4.	Connecticut	48.	Oklahoma
	Washington (tied)	47.	Arkansas
6.	Alaska	46.	Alabama
7.	Maine	45.	Pennsylvania
	New Hampshire (tied)	44.	Florida
		43.	Indiana

Each of the best states for women appears in the top ten at least once; none appears below the midpoint of all states on any of the composite indices. Only eight 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. Nine states met these criteria. For more on the methodology and for source information, see Appendix II of *The Status of Women in the States*.  
Compiled by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research.



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The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR, an independent, nonprofit 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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