

# Research-in-Brief

IWPR# R241

## The Status of Women in West Virginia *Highlights*

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

West Virginia reflects the difficult obstacles to equality still facing many women in the United States. Women in West Virginia, and in the United States as a whole, are seeing important changes in their lives and in their access to political, economic, and social rights. Still, they by no means enjoy equality with men, and they lack many of the legal guarantees that would allow them to achieve it. Women in West Virginia, and the nation, would benefit from stronger enforcement of equal opportunity laws, better political representation, adequate and affordable child care, stronger poverty reduction programs, and other policies that would help improve their status.

Among the 50 states and the District of Columbia, West Virginia ranks in the middle third in one key area of women's lives: the state is 21st for women's reproductive rights. In contrast, West Virginia ranks at or near the bottom of all states in the four other areas examined in this report: it is 46th for women's political participation, 48th for their social and economic autonomy and for their health and well-being, and last, or 51st, for women's employment and earnings (see Chart 1).

Like most states, West Virginia does not ensure equal rights for women, and the problems facing West Virginia women demand significant attention from policymakers, women's advocates, and researchers concerned with women's status. As a result, West Virginia earns the grades of B- for reproductive rights, D- for political participation and for health and well-being, and F for employment and earnings and for social and economic autonomy.

West Virginia joins the District of Columbia, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia as part of the South Atlantic region. The status of women in West Virginia is generally below average for women in this region. Among the nine states of the South Atlantic region, West Virginia ranks sixth for reproductive rights, eighth for political participation and for health and well-being, and last for employment and earnings and for social and economic autonomy.

### Women in West Virginia: What's Promising

- ♦Of West Virginia's three representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives in fall 2002, one was a woman, and one-third of all the state's high-level appointed executive officials were women.
- ♦In West Virginia, children who are eligible under federal rules are twice as likely to receive child care subsidies as they are nationally.
- ♦Women own a larger proportion of businesses in West Virginia than in all but eleven states.
- ♦West Virginia is one of just 16 states that provide public funding to eligible women for abortion and one of just eleven that require health insurance companies to cover infertility treatments.
- ♦West Virginia women are among the least likely in the country to have chlamydia or AIDS.

### Women in West Virginia: What's Disappointing

- ♦West Virginia women are among the least likely in the country to vote, and as of fall 2002, the state had no statewide elected officials who were women.
- ♦West Virginia women are among the least likely to work as professionals and managers, and they have the lowest overall labor force participation rate in the country.
- ♦At 30 cents per dollar, the wage gap between men's and women's earnings is even larger in West Virginia than nationally (at 27 cents).
- ♦Women in West Virginia have the lowest levels of educational attainment in the country.
- ♦Women in West Virginia are much more likely to live in poverty than women nationally.
- ♦Only 16 percent of women in West Virginia live in counties with abortion providers.
- ♦Women in West Virginia are among the most likely in the country to die of heart disease or lung cancer, to have diabetes, and to experience activities limitations due to their health status.

West Virginia is a small state, home to fewer than one million women. A large percentage of its population lives in rural areas, which adds to the challenges faced by the state. Women in rural areas face special problems accessing services (such as domestic violence shelters, health providers, or family planning resources) and finding employment. West Virginia's women are less racially and ethnically diverse than women nationally, with fewer immigrants, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans than the country as a whole. There is a much higher proportion of women with disabilities in West Virginia than in the nation as a whole.

While West Virginia women are witnessing real improvements in their economic, political, and social status, serious obstacles to their equality remain.

## Political Participation

Women in West Virginia register to vote at rates similar to those in the rest of the country, but their voter turnout rate is exceptionally low. Women in West Virginia also have relatively low levels of representation in elected office and only average levels of representation through institutional resources such as a women's caucus in the state legislature. Overall, the state ranks 46th and receives a grade of D- on the political participation composite index. More active voter participation and greater representation in elected office could benefit women overall by encouraging the adoption of more women-friendly policies, which in turn could enhance women's status in other areas.

## Employment and Earnings

Women in West Virginia participate in the workforce much less often, earn significantly lower wages, and work as managers or professionals much less frequently than women in the nation as a whole. Their earnings in relation to men's are also lower than in most of the country. These factors combine to place West Virginia last in the nation on the employment and earnings composite index. The state receives a grade of F in this area, reflecting the inequality women experience compared with men.

## Social and Economic Autonomy

At 48th for social and economic autonomy, West Virginia women face serious obstacles in this category as well. Although a higher proportion of businesses than average are owned by women in West Virginia (at twelfth in the country), other indicators of women's social and economic autonomy are very low. Almost 19 percent of West Virginia women lack health insurance, and almost 17 percent live below the poverty line. Finally, women in the state have the lowest levels of educational attainment in the country. West Virginia's difficulty in facilitating social and economic autonomy for women is reflected in the state's grade of F.

## Reproductive Rights

West Virginia's women have above average access to important reproductive rights and resources, and as a result the state ranks 21st nationally and sixth out of nine regionally on this composite index. The state allows access to abortion services without a waiting period and requires health insurers to cover infertility treatments. The state also requires that schools provide sex education. In contrast, West Virginia requires parental consent for abortion for minors, and it does not require insurance companies to cover contraceptives. Also, West Virginia has the lowest proportion, 16 percent, of women living in counties with an abortion provider, a particularly serious problem in a rural state. Because it still has some room for improvement, West Virginia receives a grade of B- on the reproductive rights index.

## Health and Well-Being

Women in West Virginia experience many obstacles to good health and well-being compared with women nationwide. The state ranks 48th for indicators of women's health, and it receives a grade of D- for this composite index. On the positive side, women in West Virginia have among the lowest levels of chlamydia in the country, and their incidence rate of AIDS is lower than in most states. In contrast, they fall in the bottom half of all states for almost every other indicator of women's health. They are more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes, die from heart disease or lung cancer, have poor mental health, and have limitations on their physical activity because of health issues than women in most of the country. West Virginia women's relatively poor health status could be addressed by stronger health insurance mandates and improved levels of health insurance coverage in the state.

## Women's Resources and Rights Checklist

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, heightened awareness of women's status around the world and pointed to the importance of government action and public policy for the well-being of women. At the conference, representatives of 189 countries, including the United States, unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which pledged their governments to action on behalf of women. The Platform for Action outlines critical issues of concern to women and remaining obstacles to women's advancement.

Many of the laws, policies, and programs that already exist in the United States meet the goals of the Platform for Action and support the rights of women identified in the Platform. In some ways, women in the United States enjoy access to relatively high levels of gender equality compared with women around the world. In other areas, the United States and many individual states have an opportunity to better support women's rights.

**Chart 1**  
**How West Virginia Ranks on Key Indicators**

Indicators	National Rank*	Regional Rank*	Grade
<b>Composite Political Participation Index</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>D-</b>
Women's Voter Registration, 1998 and 2000	35	6	
Women's Voter Turnout, 1998 and 2000	43	6	
Women in Elected Office Composite Index, 2002	39	6	
Women's Institutional Resources, 2002	20	7	
<b>Composite Employment and Earnings Index</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>F</b>
Women's Median Annual Earnings, 1999	45	9	
Ratio of Women's to Men's Earnings, 1999	38	8	
Women's Labor Force Participation, 2000	51	9	
Women in Managerial and Professional Occupations, 1999	47	9	
<b>Composite Social and Economic Autonomy Index</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>F</b>
Percent with Health Insurance Among Nonelderly Women, 2000	42	8	
Educational Attainment: Percent of Women with Four or More Years of College, 1990	51	9	
Women's Business Ownership, 1997	12	4	
Percent of Women Above the Poverty Level, 1999	47	8	
<b>Composite Reproductive Rights Index</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>B-</b>
<b>Composite Health and Well-Being Index</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>D-</b>

See Appendix II in *The Status of Women in West Virginia* for a detailed description of the methodology and sources used for the indices presented here.

\* The national rankings are of a possible 51, referring to the 50 states and the District of Columbia, except for the Political Participation indicators, which do not include the District of Columbia. The regional rankings are of a maximum of nine (except for the Political Participation indicators, which do not include the District of Columbia) and refer to the states in the South Atlantic region (DC, DE, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, and WV). Calculated by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

The Women's Resources and Rights Checklist, Chart 2, provides an overview of the policies supporting women's rights and the resources available to women in West Virginia. This list was derived from ideas presented in the Platform for Action, including the need for policies that help prevent violence against women, promote women's economic equality, alleviate poverty among women, improve their physical, mental, and reproductive health and well-being, and enhance their political power. The rights and resources outlined in the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist fall under several categories: protection from violence, access to income support (e.g., through welfare and child support collection), women-friendly employment protections, family leave benefits, legislation protecting sexual minorities, reproductive rights, and institutional representation of women's concerns.

Many of the indicators in Chart 2 can be affected by state policy decisions. As a result, the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist provides a measure of West Virginia's commitment to policies designed to help women achieve economic, political, and social well-being. In West Virginia, while women

have access to some of the policies and resources on the checklist, they lack many others. The state has adopted twelve out of 31 possible policies presented in the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist.

*The Status of Women in West Virginia* 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 2 Women's Resources and Rights Checklist</b>				
	Yes	No	Other	Total Number Information of States with Policy (of 51) or U.S. Average
<b>Violence Against Women</b>				
Has West Virginia adopted a domestic battery statute complementing assault laws?	✓			34
Does West Virginia law require domestic violence training of new police recruits and health care professionals?	✓			10
Does West Virginia law prohibit domestic violence discrimination in insurance?	✓			22
Is a first stalking offense a felony in West Virginia?		✓		12
Does West Virginia law require sexual assault training for police, prosecutors, and health care professionals?		✓		4
<b>Child Support</b>				
Percent of single-mother households receiving child support or alimony:			41%	34%
Percent of child support cases with orders for collection in which support was collected:			48%	39%
<b>Welfare and Poverty Policies</b>				
Does West Virginia extend TANF benefits to children born or conceived while a mother is receiving welfare?	✓			28
Does West Virginia allow receipt of TANF benefits up to or beyond the 60-month federal time limit?	✓		60-month limit	44
Does West Virginia allow welfare recipients at least 24 months before requiring participation in work activities?		✓	Immediate	13
Does West Virginia provide transitional child care under TANF for more than 12 months? <sup>1</sup>		✓		14
Has West Virginia's TANF plan been certified or submitted for certification under the Family Violence Option or made other provisions for victims of domestic violence?	✓			37
In determining welfare eligibility, does West Virginia disregard the equivalent of at least 50 percent of earnings from a full-time, minimum wage job?		✓		11
Does West Virginia have a state Earned Income Tax Credit? <sup>2</sup>		✓		16
Maximum TANF benefit for a family of three (two children) in West Virginia, 2001:			\$328.00	\$379.00
<b>Employment/Unemployment Benefits</b>				
Is West Virginia's minimum wage higher than the federal level as of January 2002?		✓	\$5.15	12
Does West Virginia have mandatory temporary disability insurance?		✓		5
Does West Virginia provide Unemployment Insurance benefits to:				
Low-wage earners?		✓		14
Workers seeking part-time jobs?		✓		9
Workers who leave their jobs for certain circumstances ("good cause quits")?		✓		30

*(continued on next page)*

Chart 2 continued

	Yes	No	Other	Total Number Information of States with Policy (of 51) or U.S. Average
Has West Virginia implemented adjustments to achieve pay equity in its state civil service?		✓		20
<b>Family Leave Benefits</b>				
Has West Virginia proposed legislation extending Unemployment Insurance benefits to workers on temporary leave to care for infants and newly adopted children?		✓		0 Enacted; 20 Proposed
Has West Virginia proposed legislation allowing use of temporary disability insurance to cover periods of work absence due to family care needs?		✓		1 Enacted; 3 Proposed
<b>Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity</b>				
Does West Virginia have civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity?		✓		14
Has West Virginia adopted legislation creating enhanced penalties or a separate offense for crimes based on sexual orientation?		✓		28
Has West Virginia avoided adopting a ban on same-sex marriage?		✓		16
<b>Reproductive Rights</b>				
Does West Virginia allow access to abortion services: Without mandatory parental consent or notification?		✓		8
Without a waiting period?	✓			29
Does West Virginia provide public funding for abortions under any or most circumstances if a woman is eligible?	✓			16
Does West Virginia require health insurers to provide comprehensive coverage for contraceptives? <sup>3</sup>		✓		19
Does West Virginia require health insurers to provide coverage of infertility treatments?	✓			11
Does West Virginia allow the non-legal parent in a gay/lesbian couple to adopt his/her partner's child? <sup>4</sup>			No case has been tried	25
Does West Virginia require schools to provide sex education? <sup>5</sup>	✓			23
<b>Institutional Resources</b>				
Does West Virginia have a commission for women?	✓			40
<b>Total Policies<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>		<b>31 possible</b>

See Appendix III in *The Status of Women in West Virginia* for a detailed description and sources for the items on this checklist.

1 West Virginia gives no priority to former welfare recipients for child care subsidies, although it does provide subsidies to families with incomes below 150 percent of the poverty line.

2 In 1998, West Virginia created an Equal Pay Commission to study the issue. On April 24, 2002, pay equity legislation for certain state government employees was signed into law. As of this report writing, details on how the funds will be spent have yet to be determined.

3 West Virginia requires that at least one method of contraception be covered for all state employees.

4 Most states that allow such adoptions do so as a result of court decisions. In West Virginia, no case has yet been tried.

5 West Virginia requires that both abstinence and contraception be taught in its sex education curriculum.

6 Policies in the "yes" and "no" columns do not add up to 31 because some of West Virginia's policies have mixed evaluations and thus fall in the "other" column.

Compiled by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

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The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) is a scientific research organization dedicated to informing and stimulating 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 issues, the economic and social aspects of health care 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 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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