



CHAPTER 8

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE STATES: 2015

Recommendations

Women in states across the nation face challenges that demand attention from policymakers, advocates, employers, and funders. While on many indicators of women's status there has been progress, women still earn less than men, own a small proportion of businesses, are more likely than their male counterparts to live in poverty, are vastly underrepresented in public office, and experience gender-based violence. Substantial racial and ethnic disparities also persist on almost every indicator of women's status, including on measures of health and well-being. Policies and programs to address these inequities can improve women's status and make a powerful difference in the lives of women, men, and children.

Strengthening Women's Political Participation

- Initiatives that strengthen the pipeline of women to political office can amplify women's political voice and ensure that policymaking at all levels—local, state, and federal—addresses issues of concern to women. Such initiatives include expanding campaign trainings for women, asking and encouraging women to run for office, educating the public about the reality of “campaigning-while-female,” encouraging women's organizations to get involved in electing more women to office, and holding political parties accountable for supporting and promoting women candidates.
- The federal government can increase pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, rendering them eligible to vote and increasing their political voice. States can strengthen women's political participation by abolishing state-level legislation that restricts the civic participation and leadership of noncitizens, and by removing restrictive voter identification laws that may prevent some women who are citizens from registering to vote and going to the polls.

Supporting Employment and Increasing Earnings for Women

- Employers should be held accountable for their obligation to monitor their hiring, compensation, and promotion practices and remedy gender and race disparities. They should be required by federal, state, or local policies to increase transparency about pay and promotion decisions and allow workers to share pay information without retaliation. States and localities could make the receipt of public contracts conditional on contractors' reviewing their pay and grading systems to make sure they are gender neutral and equitably reward skills, effort, and responsibility.
- The federal government can increase women's earnings and reduce poverty by raising the minimum wage, which would improve economic security among women, particularly women of color, who are dispro-

portionately represented among low-wage workers. States should also consider raising their minimum wages and both the states and the federal government should consider tying their minimum wages to cost-of-living increases to set a reasonable wage floor.

- The federal government and states should fully enforce labor standards and equal pay and equal employment opportunity laws, such as the Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They should also protect women's rights on the job, including the right to organize, since women with union jobs have higher earnings and better benefits than nonunionized workers. The federal government and states can also ensure that women have adequate access to information about their rights at work and in education and training, and enforce Title IX rules about equal access to educational programs at elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities.

Creating a Policy Infrastructure to Support Work-Life Balance

- States can help women stay in their jobs and advance by enacting policies such as paid family leave and paid medical leave, paid sick days, and schedule predictability, which are currently not available to many workers, especially those with low wages. States should ensure that laws and regulations fully reflect the needs of workers with caregiving responsibilities, including pregnant workers, parents, and caregivers of elderly parents or other adult family members.
- States can develop policies to require fair work scheduling practices. They can also provide technical assistance and information to employers on innovative working time and scheduling arrangements to improve work-life balance.
- To improve access to quality and affordable child care, states should increase resources for early care and education and ensure that eligible parents receive child care subsidies whether they are in work, looking for work, or pursuing training and education. States and districts should ensure that school hours (including pre-kindergarten and kindergarten) are aligned with the traditional working day and that affordable facilities are available to parents during school vacations.

Reducing Poverty and Expanding Opportunities for Women

- States can increase women's access to health care services by expanding public health programs to a wider range of women, including women with lower incomes and immigrant women who may be ineligible for public health insurance. States should opt to expand their Medicaid programs if they have not yet done so—either by expanding eligibility for all Medicaid services to those with incomes up to 138 percent of the poverty line (which 21 states had not done as of April 2015), or by expanding Medicaid family planning services to women who need assistance but are otherwise ineligible (which 22 states and the District of Columbia had not done as of April 2015).
- Policymakers, funders, and education and workforce development leaders should adopt strategies to promote gender and racial/ethnic equity in access to higher-paid, traditionally male career training opportunities. Educators and career counselors should ensure that career advice for women and girls explicitly addresses the earnings potential of different fields of study and occupations; in addition, they should work to encourage and support women pursuing nontraditional fields, including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (STEM). Vocational and education and training programs should actively encourage and recruit women to pursue nontraditional majors and careers.
- Rates of women's business ownership and the growth of women's businesses can be increased by ensuring that federal, state, and local government contracts are accessible to women-owned businesses, and through public and private sector investments in loan and entrepreneurship programs that expand business opportunities for all. The number of women-owned businesses may also be increased through technical assistance to women entrepreneurs that helps them identify good business and financing opportunities to enable them to start and grow businesses.
- States and the federal government can reduce women's poverty by strengthening the basic safety net for those who earn very low wages or cannot work, including by ensuring that those who need support from

programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) have access to these programs and by increasing the level of benefits provided. In addition, the federal government can safeguard Social Security benefits, a vital economic base for dependent survivors, the disabled, and older women that keeps many above the poverty line.

Increasing Women's Access to Reproductive Rights

- Policies to expand women's access to reproductive health services and rights enable women to determine the timing and size of their families and contribute to women's educational and economic success. States can enhance women's reproductive rights by eliminating the policy barriers that make it difficult for women to access contraception and abortion and to obtain the full range of reproductive health services and information they need.
- States should strive to ensure that all women who are pregnant or have recently given birth have adequate access to prenatal and infant care. This includes supporting health insurance coverage and early enrollment, efforts to educate women about the importance of prenatal care, and training for health care providers to give culturally sensitive care.

Improving Women's Health and Access to Health Care Services

- Increased investments in health prevention and treatment for groups that disproportionately suffer from chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and HIV/AIDS, can also expand women's access to health services and address disparities in health outcomes among women from different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups.
- Investments in programs designed to train health providers to understand the health care needs of all women—including minority and LGBT women—and address them appropriately and with sensitivity would help women make use of available services and increase their access to adequate care.

Reducing Violence and Increasing Women's Safety

- Increased enforcement of existing policies to promote women's safety and the enactment of new statutes can help to ensure that women can live free from violence, harassment, stalking, and abuse. The federal government can take steps such as creating a more comprehensive approach to protect women from gun violence, continuing to support funding streams that provide essential services and supports for domestic violence victims, and raising awareness about sexual and dating violence on college campuses and strategies for addressing it. States can safeguard the employment rights of domestic violence victims, bar abusers from gun possession, and recognize stalking as a serious crime that includes a wide range of behaviors, among other actions.
- Improved data collection on women's experiences with violence and abuse would help researchers and policymakers develop a more complete understanding of the challenges women face and solutions to address them. Investing in data collection and studies to produce consistent and reliable quantitative state-by-state estimates on key indicators related to women's safety, and information disaggregated by race and ethnicity, is essential to pinpointing the greatest threats to safety for women, reducing violence and abuse, and holding perpetrators accountable.
- States can address the threats to personal safety that many students experience by encouraging schools to implement a health curriculum on physical and mental health that includes dating violence, online harassment, and bullying prevention.

Such changes are essential to improving the economic security, health, civic and political participation, and overall well-being of women in states across the nation. Women and girls are an integral part of each state's future, and their progress can positively affect the lives of all residents. Information—and data that track progress over time—can strengthen efforts to make each state a place where women from all walks of life can thrive, leading to a stronger economy and nation.

