

# THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE SOUTH

Executive Summary



**STATUS OF WOMEN**  
IN THE STATES





# Introduction

## Why The Status of Women in the South?

The southern United States is a dynamic and influential region marked by innovation and economic opportunities for women, yet also a region where inequalities persist and many women—especially women of color and those who are immigrants—face challenges such as high unemployment, a large gender wage gap, abuse of their reproductive rights, and low levels of political representation. This complex picture of the South as a region where both opportunities and disparities exist is often lost by those who either romanticize the South’s positive qualities or exaggerate its negative aspects. Between these two views of the southern United States—both of which are at least partially based in reality—this report relies on empirical data to provide a balanced understanding of the status of women in the South today.

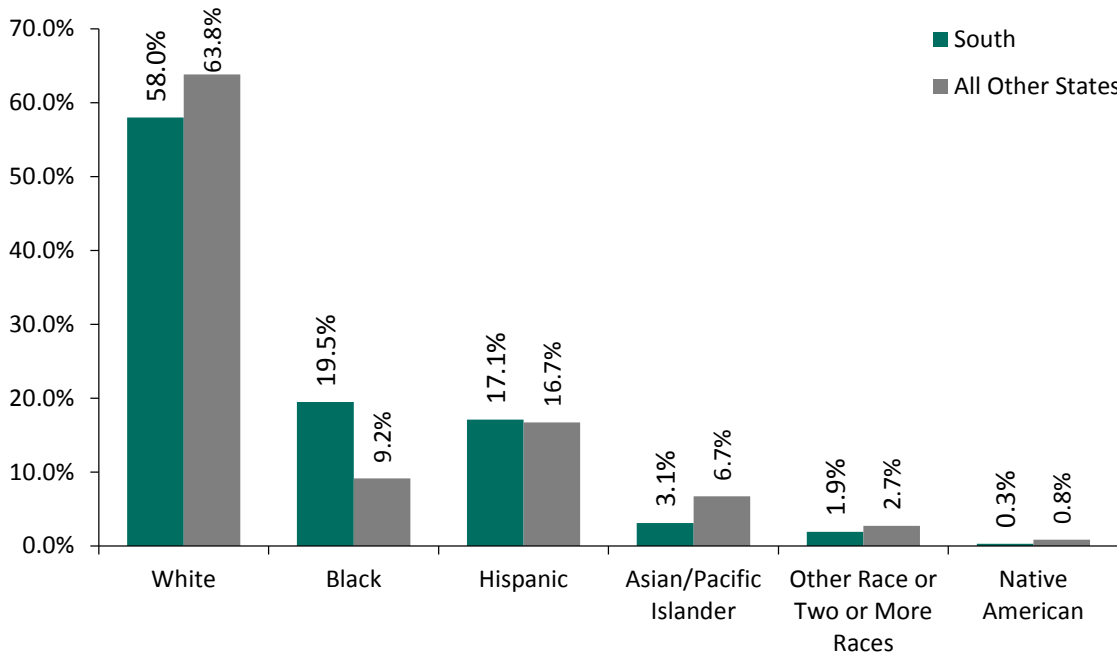
Women in this region are living in a place that is rapidly changing. New employment opportunities are opening up, due in part to a return of manufacturing, the growth of technology and banking firms, and an

increasing number of corporations locating their headquarters in the South, often drawn by lower taxes for businesses and a lower cost of living for employees (Grantmakers for Southern Progress 2015). Partly as a result of these changes, the South is growing: between 2010 and 2015, the population of the 14 southern states included in this report grew by 6.2 million (5.9 percent), nearly as much as all other states in the nation combined (6.5 million, or 3.2 percent; Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2015).<sup>1</sup> Some newcomers to the region are immigrants, while others are those with southern roots who are returning in what has been called the “New Great Migration” (Frey 2004). As of 2014, the South was home to 55.5 million of the country’s 162.0 million girls and women, over one third of the nation’s female population.

The new employment and economic opportunities that the South offers its growing number of women (and men) are not, however, equally shared. Disparities in opportunities based on gender and race persist, the lasting consequences of the nation’s historical subjugation of women and people of color as well as the South’s distinctive legacy of displacement, slavery, and Jim Crow. Black, Hispanic, and Native American women in the South—who are located at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression based on their

Figure A.1.

### Distribution of Women of All Ages, by Race/Ethnicity and South/Non-South, 2014



Notes: Data are three-year (2012-2014) averages. Racial categories are non-Hispanic. Hispanics may be of any race or two or more races. Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 6.0).

<sup>1</sup> In this report, southern states include Alabama, Arkansas, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Throughout the report, the District of Columbia may be referred to as a state, although it is technically a jurisdiction.

gender and race—have especially low earnings and high poverty rates, as well as high rates of victimization from violence and certain adverse health conditions. The incarceration of women and men of color, strict voter ID laws, anti-union legislation, and restrictions on access to reproductive rights reinforce the marginalization that women in the South have long faced, especially black women, who make up a higher share of the population in Southern states than in the rest of the nation (Figure A.1).

## About the Report

In recent years, scholarship on the South has grown (e.g., Grantmakers for Southern Progress 2015; MDC 2014; Smith and Harper 2015; Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative 2015), yet few studies have specifically examined the circumstances of women in this region. Building on IWPR’s long-standing report series, *The Status of Women in the States*—which since 1996 has provided data on women nationally and for all 50 states and the District of Columbia—this report aims to address this gap by exploring the challenges and opportunities that women in the South face, with a focus on women of color. Following The Institute for Southern Studies’ and MDC’s definition of the South, it provides data on Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia in its definition of the South.<sup>2</sup> In addition, IWPR’s analysis of the South includes the District of Columbia, referring to it throughout the report as a “state” for the sake of simplicity.

This report analyzes data for these 14 states across seven topical areas that affect women’s lives: political participation, employment and earnings, work and family, poverty and opportunity, reproductive rights, health and well-being, and violence and safety. For each topic except violence and safety, a composite index is calculated based upon that state’s scores on component indicators; the states are then ranked from best to worst and a letter grade is assigned based on the difference between a state’s performance in that area and goals established by IWPR (as detailed in Appendix A of each chapter). Basic demographic data for each state are provided, and data are disaggregated by race and ethnicity whenever possi-

ble. In addition, the report includes data on various population groups—older women, millennial women, rural women, women with disabilities, immigrant women, and LGBT women—and concludes with a set of recommendations to improve the status of women in the U.S. South.

*The Status of Women in the South* highlights differences between women in this region and the rest of the country, with attention to variations by race and ethnicity. Providing critical data to identify disparities that women face in the South and pinpoint possible solutions is essential for developing community investments, programs, and public policies that can lead to positive changes for women and families.

## Key Findings

The *Status of Women in the South* identifies a number of key findings:

- Women in the South are significantly underrepresented relative to their share of the population at all levels of government. For example, women from southern states hold just 12.2 percent of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and 18.4 percent of seats in southern state legislatures. Only 4.8 percent of U.S. Representatives of southern states are women of color, yet the percent of southern state legislators who are women of color (6.7 percent) is higher than the national average.
- If progress continues at the rate of change since 1975, Arkansas and Georgia will be the first Southern states to have gender parity in their state legislature (both in 2066). Two Southern states—South Carolina and West Virginia—will have to wait over 200 years for parity.
- In every state in the South, as in the nation overall, women who work full-time, year-round earn less than similarly-employed men. In the South as a whole, women earn 79.5 cents on the dollar compared with their male counterparts, while women in all other states earn 80.0 cents on the dollar compared with men. Hispanic women in the South have the lowest median annual earnings of any racial or ethnic group (\$26,000) and Asian/Pacific Islander women have the highest (\$44,500).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.southernstudies.org/iss> for the Institute for Southern Studies’ research on the South, and <http://www.mdcinc.org/resources/state-of-the-south> for MDC’s flagship *State of the South* reports.

- If all working women in the South aged 18 and older were paid the same as comparable men—men of the same age, level of education, and urban/rural residence, and who work the same number of hours—women’s average earnings in this region would increase from \$35,788 to \$42,180 (\$6,392 or 17.9 percent) annually. Added up across all working women in the South, this would amount to an earnings increase of \$155.4 billion, or 2.8 percent of the southern states’ combined gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014.
- For black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander women, the difference in earnings between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor’s degree or higher is greater for women in the South than for women in other states. Asian/Pacific Islander women in the South with a bachelor’s degree or higher earn more than two and a half times what Asian women with a high school diploma do (the median annual earnings are \$65,000 for those with a college degree and \$25,000 for those with a high school diploma); black and Hispanic women with a bachelor’s degree or higher nearly double their earnings (from \$24,700 to \$48,000 for black women and from \$24,000 to \$47,000 for Hispanic women).
- The median weekly earnings of women in the South employed full-time, year-round who are represented by a union are \$205 (or 31.3 percent) more than earnings of full-time employed women in the South who are not represented by a union. Unionized black and Hispanic women in the South have a greater earnings advantage over their non-union counterparts (with wage advantages of 34.5 and 59.5 percent, respectively) than do black and Hispanic women in other states (who still have a wage advantage of 28.2 and 44.4 percent, respectively).
- In half of all families with children younger than 18 in the South, mothers are breadwinners in their families, meaning they are either a sole provider or a married mother who earns at least 40 percent of the couple’s total earnings. Among the largest racial and ethnic groups, black mothers in the South are the most likely to be breadwinners (79.6 percent). There are more breadwinner mothers in the South who are black (1.6 million) than in all other states combined (1.5 million).
- Women in the South tend to have better access to quality, affordable child care when compared with the United States overall. West Virginia ranks first in the South and the nation on an index that includes the cost of infant center care as a proportion of the median annual earnings of women; the percent of four-year-olds enrolled in state Pre-K, preschool special education, and state and federal Head Start programs; and the number of quality indicators met by the state’s Pre-K programs. Half of the 14 southern states rank in the top ten nationally on the child care index.
- In the South, the poverty rate among women overall (16.4 percent) is higher than in all other states outside the South (13.7 percent). Women in Mississippi have the highest poverty rate in the nation; more than one in five women aged 18 and older in the state (21.5 percent) have family incomes placing them below the federal poverty line. Among women from the largest racial and ethnic groups in the South, black women have the highest poverty rate at 25.5 percent, followed by Hispanic (23.4 percent) and Native American women (20.9 percent).
- In the South, if working women aged 18 and older were paid the same as comparable men, the poverty rate among all working women would fall by more than half, from 9.4 to 4.6 percent. In six states—Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—the poverty rate would also decrease by more than half. The poverty rate among working single mothers in the South would drop by nearly half, from 30.8 to 15.9 percent, if they earned the same as comparable men, with the greatest reduction in Louisiana, where it would decrease from 43.5 percent to 16.8 percent.
- Women’s business ownership is one area in which the southern states perform particularly well. Of the 14 southern states, nine have shares of women-owned businesses that are higher than the national average. The District of Columbia leads the South in women’s business ownership with 42.7 percent of businesses owned by women, the highest share in the nation. Georgia also has a particularly high share of businesses that are

women-owned (40.5 percent), earning it the rank of second both regionally and nationally. Women of color have experienced a substantial increase in entrepreneurship. Nationally, the percentage of businesses owned by women of color grew from 17 percent in 1997 to 38 percent in 2012. Further, women of color are much closer to achieving an equal balance of businesses owned by men and women within their own racial/ethnic group than white women are. In 2012, for example, black women owned nearly 60 percent of all black-owned businesses, compared with white women, who owned only 33 percent of all white-owned businesses.

- As of January 2016, nine southern states had extended family planning services to individuals who were otherwise ineligible, either through a waiver or through a State Plan Amendment (including Texas, which had an expansion funded solely by the state). Of these nine states, Florida is the only state that provided these benefits to women who lose Medicaid coverage for any reason, rather than basing eligibility only on income. Three southern states—Arkansas, Kentucky, and West Virginia—and the District of Columbia had expanded the Medicaid program overall but did not have a family planning eligibility expansion. Louisiana was the only southern state to both adopt the Medicaid expansion and have a family planning eligibility expansion.
- As of December 2015, 13 states in the South had statutes requiring mandatory waiting periods for obtaining an abortion and enforced these statutes, with waiting periods ranging from 24 to 72 hours. Thirteen southern states also had parental consent or notification laws that require parents of a minor seeking an abortion to consent to the procedure or be notified; the District of Columbia has neither. While 17 states nationally fund abortions for low-income women who were eligible for Medicaid in all or most medically necessary circumstances, West Virginia was the only southern state to do so.
- Women in the South are as likely or are more likely than women in the rest of the country to have been screened for cholesterol, had a mammogram, and to have ever been tested for HIV. A higher proportion of women in the South have been screened

for cholesterol in the past five years than women in other regions (64.2 percent compared with 60.2 percent). About four in five women over the age of 50, in the South and in the other states, have had a mammogram in the past two years. Nationally, black women are the racial and ethnic group with the highest share who have had a mammogram (85.5 percent), which is especially positive given that they have the highest rates of breast cancer mortality. More than four in ten women in the southern states have ever been tested for HIV (41.4 percent), exceeding the proportion outside the South (35.6 percent). Among the major racial and ethnic groups, black women are the most likely to have been tested for HIV, which is a positive sign since they have much higher rates of HIV than other women.

- Compared with women in other parts of the country, women in many southern states have higher rates of heart disease and breast cancer mortality, greater incidence of diabetes and AIDS, and a higher average number of days per month when mental health is not good and days when poor mental or physical health limits their activities.
- As of June 2014, four of the thirteen southern states (Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia) and the District of Columbia had barred those convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence crimes from gun possession. In the District of Columbia, Tennessee, and West Virginia, the ban included crimes against “dating partners.” In Tennessee, individuals with misdemeanor domestic violence convictions were required to surrender certain firearms.
- Black women are two and a half times more likely to be murdered by men than are white women. The eleven southern states for which there are data accounted for over one third of all female homicides by a man in 2013 (571 of the 1,615 victims). South Carolina had the highest murder rate in the country at 2.32 per 100,000 women—nearly double the national rate. Although over half (53 percent) of homicides of women by men are committed using a firearm, South Carolina is one of seven southern states that has no statutes restricting gun possession for those convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence, sex, or stalking crimes, or those subject to domestic violence protection orders.

Women in the South also experience disparities by age, immigrant status, rural residence, sexual orientation, and disability status.

- Southern millennial women aged 25-34 are more likely to have a bachelor's degree (33.6 percent) than southern millennial men (25.4 percent), but less likely than millennial women in all other states (39.5 percent). Though Hispanic millennial women in the South have the lowest proportion of women with bachelor's degrees when compared with other racial and ethnic groups in the South (19.2 percent), they are more likely to hold advanced degrees than Hispanic millennial women in all other states (17.6 percent).
- Women in the South aged 65 and older have a higher poverty rate (11.8 percent) than older women in all other states (10.2 percent). Among older women in the South, more than one in five Native American, Hispanic, and black women live in poverty (22.1, 21.7, and 21.5 percent, respectively). Southern white women aged 65 and older have the lowest poverty rate at 8.8 percent.
- Median annual earnings for U.S.-born women are 28.2 percent higher than earnings for immigrant women across the south (\$35,900 and \$28,000, respectively). In the South, immigrant women from India and China have the highest median annual earnings (\$60,000 and \$50,000, respectively), while women from Guatemala and Honduras have the lowest (\$20,000 each).
- Almost one in five women in rural areas of the South live below the poverty line (19.1 percent). Rural black women are the most likely to live in poverty (32.9 percent), followed by Hispanic women (27.1 percent), Native American women (25.0 percent), white women (15.3 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islander women (14.3 percent).
- In the South, 72.9 percent of women aged 16 and older living with a same-sex partner participate in the labor force, compared with 56.9 percent of southern women married to men. Women in the South living with a same-sex partner and working full-time year-round also have higher median annual earnings (\$42,000) and lower rates of poverty than women in the South in other types of households.
- In the South, 3.8 million women between the ages of 21 and 64 have a disability that may include cognitive, ambulatory, sight, hearing, and self-care or independent living difficulties. The proportion of women with a disability is higher for those living in the South than for those in all other states (12.0 percent compared with 10.3 percent, respectively). In the South, the percentage of women with a disability is highest among Native American women (24.0 percent), followed by women of another race or two or more races (14.5 percent), black women (14.4 percent), and white women (12.5 percent). Asian/Pacific Islander (4.2 percent) and Hispanic women (8.2 percent) are the least likely to have a disability.
- Women in the South aged 18 and older with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty (24.1 percent) than southern women without disabilities (14.9 percent). Yet, the poverty rates of black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American women with disabilities is lower for those living in a southern state compared with those in other regions.

### *Letter Grades in the South*

Women's status in the South varies across the various topical areas examined in this report (Table A.1.). The southern states earn their highest grades on the Reproductive Rights Composite Index; on this Index, 10 of the 14 southern states receive grades above D and none of the states receives an F. The region also performs relatively well on the Work & Family Composite Index, with six states receiving either B's or C's and none of the states receiving failing grades. The results are not as good for the Poverty & Opportunity Composite Index; only three states are graded above a D and two states receive F's. There is a wide range of grades on the Employment & Earnings Composite Index—six states receive an A, B, or C, yet five states fail. The composite indices with the consistently lowest grades for southern states are Political Participation and Health & Well-Being. Only one of the 13 southern states (the District of Columbia is not included) receives a grade above D on the Political Participation Composite Index and three states earn F's. The South receives the worst grades on the Health & Well-Being Composite Index. Three states of 14 receive F's and just two earn grades above D.

## Best and Worst States in the South

Best and Worst States in the South			
State	Average GPA	Rank based on Average GPA	Overall Grade
District of Columbia	3.00	1	B
Virginia	1.78	2	C-
North Carolina	1.67	3	C-
Georgia	1.56	4	C-
Florida	1.28	5	D+
Texas	1.28	5	D+
Kentucky	1.17	7	D+
South Carolina	1.17	7	D+
Tennessee	1.00	9	D
West Virginia	1.00	9	D
Louisiana	0.84	11	D
Arkansas	0.61	12	D-
Mississippi	0.61	12	D-
Alabama	0.50	14	D-

The status of women in the South varies across states. To determine the best and worst states for women in this region, IWPR calculated a GPA for every state by assigning converting the letter grades for each of the six topical areas to a point value and then computing the average of these values to arrive at an overall GPA and letter grade.<sup>3</sup> The District of Columbia, which received an A or B in all areas except for Health & Well-Being, has an overall GPA of 3.00 and a letter grade of B, making it the best place in the South for women. Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia rank 2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup>, respectively, and receive a grade of C-. The worst state for women in the South is Alabama, which ranks last with an overall GPA of 0.50 and a grade of D-. Mississippi and Arkansas tie for 12<sup>th</sup> place, or second worst state for women, also earning grades of D-.

<sup>3</sup>The letter grades for each composite index were converted to a GPA using this scale: A=4.00, A-=3.67, B+=3.33, B=3.00, B-=2.67, C+=2.33, C=2.00, C-=1.67, D+=1.33, D=1.00, D-=0.67, F=0 ("GPA to Letter Grade Conversion Calculator" 2016). To determine the overall grade based on the average GPA, each state was assigned the closest grade to the GPA value.

Table A.1.

### Letters Grades on Composite Indices for Southern States

State	Grade on Composite Indices						Average GPA (rounded)	Rank based on Average GPA	Overall Grade
	Political Participation	Employment & Earnings	Work & Family	Poverty & Opportunity	Reproductive Rights	Health & Well-Being			
Alabama	D-	F	D-	D-	D	F	0.50	14	D-
Arkansas	F	F	C+	F	D+	F	0.61	12	D-
District of Columbia	N/A	A	B	A-	A-	D-	3.00	1	B
Florida	D+	D+	D-	D+	C-	D+	1.28	5	D+
Georgia	D-	C	C	C-	C	D	1.56	4	C-
Kentucky	D	D+	D+	D-	C	D-	1.17	7	D+
Louisiana	D-	F	C	D-	D	D-	0.84	11	D
Mississippi	D+	F	D-	F	C-	F	0.61	12	D-
North Carolina	C-	C+	D+	D+	C	D+	1.67	3	C-
South Carolina	D-	D	C-	D	C	D-	1.17	7	D+
Tennessee	D-	C-	D	D	D	D-	1.00	9	D
Texas	F	C	D+	D	C-	C-	1.28	5	D+
Virginia	D-	B	D-	B-	C-	C	1.78	2	C-
West Virginia	F	F	C-	D-	B	D-	1.00	9	D
Average Score	0.72	1.33	1.45	1.17	1.83	0.81			

Note: For the methodology to determine grades for a composite index, see Appendix A for each corresponding chapter.



## About the Indicators and the Data

### *The Selection of Indicators*

IWPR referred to several sources for guidelines on what to include in *The Status of Women in the States* reports when developing the project in the mid-1990s. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women guided some of IWPR's choices of indicators. This document, the result of an official convocation of delegates from around the world, outlines issues of concern to women, rights fundamental to achieving equality and autonomy, and remaining obstacles to women's advancement. IWPR also worked with state advisory committees between 1996 and 2004 to produce a report for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia; these committees reviewed their state's report and provided input for improving the project as a whole. Finally, IWPR staff consulted experts in each subject area for input about the most critical issues affecting the lives of women across the nation and in the South.

Ultimately, IWPR selected indicators by using several principles: relevance, representativeness, reliability, efficiency, and comparability of data across all the states and the District of Columbia. Many of the indicators presented in IWPR's earlier reports (1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2015) are also presented here; this continuity allows for comparisons across time. Since the publication of IWPR's most recent status of women report, *The Status of Women in the States: 2015*, one composite index was changed; an indicator on same-sex marriage or second-parent adoption was omitted from the Reproductive Rights Composite Index following the June 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the United States.<sup>4</sup> (For more on changes to indicators occurring between the 2004 and 2015 reports, see Hess et al. 2015).

To facilitate comparisons among states, IWPR uses only data collected in the same way for each state. Much of the data are from federal government agencies, including the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention. Nonprofit and research organizations also provided data that are used in this report. Whenever possible, data are disaggregated by gender and by race and ethnicity.

### *American Community Survey Data*

Prior to 2015, IWPR used the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of a nationally representative sample of households conducted jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to produce statistics for major economic indices and rankings. Since 2015, the reports rely primarily on the American Community Survey (ACS) from the Minnesota Population Center's Integrated Public Use Microdata Series. The ACS is a large annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau of a representative sample of the entire resident population in the United States, including both households and group quarter (GQ) facilities. The ACS's larger sample sizes compared with the Current Population Survey make it possible to provide data on women disaggregated by race/ethnicity and age at the state level. For this report, IWPR used 2014 data, the most recent available, for most indicators and combined three years of data (2012, 2013, and 2014) when necessary to ensure sufficient sample sizes. For more information on the differences between the CPS and ACS and their impact on economic measures, see Appendices A2 and A4.

Identifying and reporting on geographic areas within states (cities or counties) were beyond the scope of this project, which means that differences in women's status across substate areas are not reflected. While IWPR has addressed such differences in other recent *Status of Women in the States* reports, addressing them was not possible here due to space limitations and resource constraints.

Some of the differences reported between two states—or between a state and the nation—for a given indicator are likely to be statistically significant. That is, they are unlikely to have occurred by chance and probably represent a true difference between two states or the state and the country as a whole. In other cases, these differences are too small to be statistically significant and are likely to have occurred by chance. IWPR did not calculate or report measures of statistical significance. Generally, the larger a difference

<sup>4</sup>In order to maintain a Reproductive Rights composite score that is roughly comparable to the historical composites, allowing comparisons over time, while also preserving the relative importance of each indicator, IWPR used a simple multiplier (of 7/6.5) for each composite index score to achieve values similar to those in previous years.

between two values (for any given sample size or distribution), the more likely it is that the difference is statistically significant. Sample sizes differ among the indicators analyzed.

## How *The Status of Women in the States* Reports Are Used

*The Status of Women in the States* reports have three primary goals: 1) to analyze and disseminate information about women's progress in achieving rights and opportunities; 2) to identify and measure the remaining barriers to equality; and 3) to provide baseline measures for monitoring women's progress. The reports have been used throughout the country

to highlight remaining obstacles facing women in the United States and to encourage policy changes designed to improve women's status. IWPR's state and local partners use the reports to educate the public on issues related to women's well-being; inform policies and programs; make the case for changes that benefit women, including establishing commissions for women, expanding child care subsidies for low-income women, encouraging women to vote and run for office, strengthening supports for women-owned businesses, developing training programs for women to enter nontraditional occupations, and increasing women's access to health care; establish investment priorities; and inspire community efforts to strengthen area economies by increasing the participation of women and improving women's status.

## References

Frey, William H. 2004. *The New Great Migration: Black Americans' Return to the South, 1965-2000*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. <[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2004/5/demographics-frey/20040524\\_frey.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2004/5/demographics-frey/20040524_frey.pdf)> (accessed January 26, 2016).

"GPA to Letter Grade Conversion Calculator." 2016. <<http://www.rapidtables.com/calc/grade/gpa-to-letter-grade-calculator.htm>> (accessed February 17, 2016).

Grantmakers for Southern Progress. 2015. *As the South Goes: Philanthropy and Social Justice in the U.S. South*. Grantmakers for Southern Progress. <<http://www.fcgworks.com/clients/nfg/website-files/AsTheSouthGoes-FullReport.pdf>> (accessed August 3, 2015).

Hess, Cynthia, Jessica Milli, Jeff Hayes, and Ariane Hegewisch. 2015. *The Status of Women in the States: 2015*. Report, IWPR #400. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<http://statusofwomendata.org/app/uploads/2015/02/Status-of-Women-in-the-States-2015-Full-National-Report.pdf>>.

Institute for Women's Policy Research. 2015. *IWPR Analysis of Cumulative Estimates of the Resident Population Change for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2015 (NST-EST2015-02)*. <<http://www.census.gov/popest/data/state/totals/2015/tables/NST-EST2015-02.xlsx>> (accessed January 29, 2016).

Mason, C. Nicole. 2015. *Unequal Lives: The State of Black Women and Families in the Rural South*. Jackson, MS: Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative. <<http://www.cdf-sro.org/research-library/2015/unequal-lives-the-state-of.pdf>>.

MDC. 2014. *State of the South: Building an Infrastructure of Opportunity for the Next Generation*. Durham, NC: MDC. <<http://stateofthesouth.org/#download-full-report>> (accessed August 6, 2015).

Smith, Edward J. and Shaun R. Harper. 2015. *Disproportionate Impact of K-12 School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in Southern States*. Philadelphia, PA: Penn Graduate School of Education, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. <<http://www.gse.upenn.edu/equity/sites/gse.upenn.edu/equity/files/publications/SOUTHADVANCEDDRAFT24AUG15.pdf>> (accessed December 2, 2015).





## | Recommendations

### Recommendations

Women in the South face challenges that deserve attention from policymakers, advocates, employers, and funders. Despite women’s progress, they are underrepresented in political offices, their labor is undervalued, they are more likely to live in poverty than men, and they are too often victims of gender-based violence. Women of color, who are subject to sexism and racism, face even greater hardships and disparities, including on measures of health. Policies and programs to address these inequities can improve southern women’s status and make a powerful difference in the lives of women, men, and children.

#### Strengthening Women’s Political Participation

- Given the underrepresentation of women, and especially women of color, in political office, efforts should be made to strengthen the pipeline of women to political office. Initiatives should include expanding campaign trainings for women and tailoring training to women of color, 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

of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to office, and holding political parties accountable for supporting and promoting women candidates. If more women in the South held political office, they could amplify women’s political voice and ensure that policymaking at all levels—local, state, and federal—addresses issues of concern to southern women.

- The South continues to attract large numbers of immigrants; those who are undocumented are particularly unempowered and vulnerable to exploitation. The federal government can increase pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, rendering them eligible to vote and increasing their political voice. The southern 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 women, including those who are citizens, from registering to vote and going to the polls.

#### Supporting Employment and Increasing Earnings for Women

- The federal government and southern states should fully enforce the Equal Pay Act and state

equivalents. There is no single greater policy lever than equal pay to increase women’s earnings and grow the economy. If all working women in the South aged 18 and older were paid the same as comparable men—men of the same age, level of education, and urban/rural residence, and who work the same number of hours—women’s average earnings would increase by 17.9 percent annually. Added up across all working women in the South, this would amount to an earnings increase of \$155.4 billion, or 2.8 percent of the southern states’ combined gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014.

- To remedy gender and race disparities in earnings, which are greater for women of color in the South than for their counterparts in other states, employers should be held accountable for their obligation to monitor their hiring, compensation, and promotion practices. 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.
- Federal and state governments should 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, an advantage that women in 11 of the 14 southern states with “Right-to-Work” laws cannot enjoy.

## Creating a Policy Infrastructure to Support Work-Life Balance

- In half of all families with children younger than 18 in the South, mothers are breadwinners in their families, meaning they are either a sole provider or a married mother who earns at least 40 percent of a couple’s total earnings. Women of color in the South make up the majority of all breadwinner mothers, making work-life supports especially critical for them and their families. Southern states can help women stay in their jobs and advance by enacting policies such as paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, and schedule predictability, which are currently not available to the vast majority of workers in the South, 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.

- Although women in the South tend to have better access to quality, affordable child care when compared with the United States overall, such quality child care is still out of reach for many low-income and rural women in the South. To improve access to quality and affordable child care, southern 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 care is available to parents during school vacations.

## Reducing Poverty and Expanding Opportunities for Women

- Given the persistently high rates of poverty among women in the South, rates that are even higher for women of color, the benefit of equal pay for women would be seen not only in women’s increased earnings, but also in a dramatic reduction in poverty. In the South, if working women aged 18 and older were paid the same as comparable men, the poverty rate among all working women would fall by more than half, from 9.4 to 4.6 percent. The poverty rate among working single mothers would drop from 30.8 to 15.9 percent if they earned the same as comparable men.
- Fewer women aged 18-64 in southern states are covered by health insurance than women in other states, and fewer women of color have health insurance compared with white women. The southern 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 federally assisted health insurance, especially in the eight southern states that have not opted to expand their Medicaid programs.
- Southern states can capitalize on the recent growth in women’s business ownership, and substantial increase in businesses owned by women of color, by ensuring that state and local government contracts are accessible to women-owned and minority-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.

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.

## Increasing Women’s Access to Reproductive Rights

- Southern 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. Efforts to regulate abortion providers that result in clinic closures should be challenged, as those clinics also provide essential health services for poor, rural, and minority women who may not have access to any other health care.
- To reduce the higher rates of maternal and infant mortality in the South compared with other states, southern 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 women in the South, who disproportionately suffer from chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and HIV/AIDS, can expand women’s access to health services and address disparities in health outcomes among women from different racial and ethnic groups.
- Investments in programs designed to train health providers to understand the mental and physical health care needs of all women—including minority

## 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. More southern states could enact statutes barring those convicted of domestic violence, stalking, or sex crimes from possessing a firearm.
- 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.

Such changes are essential to improving the economic security, health, civic and political participation, and overall well-being of women in the South. Women and girls are an integral part of the South’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 southern state a place where women from all walks of life can thrive, leading to a stronger economy and nation.

