

# Research-in-Brief

IWPR# R244

## The Status of Women in Rhode Island *Highlights*

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

Rhode Island illustrates both the advances and limited progress achieved by women in the United States. While women in Rhode Island are seeing important changes in their lives and their access to political, economic, and social rights, they do not enjoy equality with men and lack many of the legal guarantees that would allow them to achieve it. Women in Rhode Island, 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 to improve their status.

Despite Rhode Island's strong performance, women in the state have not achieved equality with men. Women in Rhode Island still face significant problems that demand attention from policymakers, women's advocates, and researchers concerned with women's status. As a result, in an evaluation of Rhode Island women's status compared with goals set for women's status, Rhode Island gets a grade of B in reproductive rights, C+ in employment and earnings and in social and economic autonomy, C in health and well-being, and D in political participation (see Chart 1).

Of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Rhode Island scores in the top third of all states in three areas: it is tenth for women's reproductive rights, 14th for social and economic autonomy, and 16th for employment and earnings. It falls in the middle third of all states in two areas: 26th for women's health and well-being and 32nd for political participation).

Rhode Island, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont are part of the New England region. Among these six states, Rhode Island ranks low: fourth for reproductive rights, fifth for social and economic autonomy and employment and earnings, and last for political participation and health and well-being.

Rhode Island has the ninth smallest population in the United States. Women of color make up about 28 percent of women in the state, compared with 31 percent in the nation as a whole. Still, Rhode Island's diversity is growing. In particu-

### Women in Rhode Island: What's Promising

- ♦Women in Rhode Island have the highest levels of health insurance coverage in the country.
- ♦Rhode Island women have the lowest levels of mortality from suicide in the country.
- ♦Women in Rhode Island have among the highest levels of political representation through institutional resources, including a commission for women and a women's legislative caucus.
- ♦Women's earnings in the state are among the highest in the nation.
- ♦Rhode Island is one of the few states that require insurance policies to cover both contraceptives and infertility treatments.
- ♦Rhode Island has several important welfare policies that benefit women. It allows the maximum time under federal law for welfare eligibility, has adopted work exemptions for women experiencing domestic violence, and extends full benefits to children born or conceived while a mother receives welfare. The maximum monthly benefit for families receiving welfare in Rhode Island is also much higher than the national average.
- ♦An Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) following the federal model has been adopted in Rhode Island.

### Women in Rhode Island: What's Disappointing

- ♦Rhode Island women have among the lowest levels of elected representation in state and national office in the country.
- ♦Rhode Island women have among the worst mortality rates from heart disease, lung cancer, and breast cancer. They rank last in New England for women's overall health.
- ♦There is great racial disparity in the incidence of AIDS in the state. While just 2.6 per 100,000 white women have AIDS, 32.2 Hispanic women and an even more alarming 78.8 African American women have the disease.
- ♦Within the New England region, Rhode Island women have the lowest labor force participation rate and the lowest proportion of women working in professional and managerial positions.
- ♦Regionally, Rhode Island women have the second lowest rates of educational attainment and the second highest rates of poverty.
- ♦Rhode Island does not provide public funding for low-income women to pay for abortions.

lar, the proportion of Hispanic women in Rhode Island more than doubled during the 1990s. Rhode Island also has higher proportions of women over age 65 and foreign-born women than the rest of the country. A much higher proportion of Rhode Island women than U.S. women live in urban areas. These factors all affect the status of Rhode Island's women.

Women in Rhode Island exemplify both the achievements and shortfalls of women's progress over the past century. Many Rhode Island 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 compared with other states. But many important problems and obstacles remain.

## Political Participation

Women in Rhode Island register and vote at higher rates than women in the United States overall, and they have very high levels of political representation through institutional resources such as a commission for women. At the same time, Rhode Island women have very low levels of representation in elected office, at 40th in the country. Consequently the state ranks 32nd and receives a grade of D on the political participation composite index. Regionally, Rhode Island is last for both women's representation and the overall political participation index. Better representation in elected office could benefit women 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 Rhode Island earn more than women in other states. They are about as likely to participate in the labor force and to work in managerial and professional positions as women in the country as a whole. The wage ratio between women and men in the state is also about average compared with the rest of the country. Within New England, Rhode Island is about average for women's earnings and the wage ratio, but it is last for women's labor force participation and work in managerial and professional positions. These trends earn Rhode Island a ranking of 16th nationally and fifth of six regionally. It receives a C+ on the employment and earnings composite index.

## Social and Economic Autonomy

Women in Rhode Island have the highest levels of health insurance coverage in the country. In contrast, they have average levels of educational attainment, business ownership, and poverty. It is fourth out of six in New England for women's business ownership and fifth for women's educational attainment and for women living above poverty. Overall, Rhode Island ranks 14th nationally and fifth out of six regionally for women's social and

economic autonomy. Rhode Island's room for improvement is reflected in its grade of C+ for this composite index.

## Reproductive Rights

Rhode Island's women have many of the reproductive rights identified as important. The state allows access to abortion without a waiting period, and it requires health insurers to cover contraceptives and infertility treatments. It also requires students to take sex education classes. However, the state requires parental consent for abortions for minors and lacks public funding for abortion. Overall, Rhode Island is tenth nationally and fourth out of six regionally for women's reproductive rights. Because it still has room for improvement, Rhode Island receives a grade of B on the reproductive rights index.

## Health and Well-Being

Overall, women in Rhode Island experience about average health status compared with women in other states. They have the lowest levels of mortality from suicide in the country, and they experience better than average levels of diabetes and activities limitations due to health problems. At the same time, they have among the worst levels of mortality from heart disease, lung cancer, and breast cancer. Rhode Island's national rank of 26th on indicators of health and well-being suggests that while the state ranks higher than many others, it still has room for improvement. Within New England, Rhode Island ranks last in women's health. The state receives a C on this composite index.

## 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.

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 Rhode Island. This list was derived from ideas presented in the Platform for

**Chart 1**  
**How Rhode Island Ranks on Key Indicators**

Indicators	National Rank*	Regional Rank*	Grade
<b>Composite Political Participation Index</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>D</b>
Women's Voter Registration, 1998 and 2000	18	3	
Women's Voter Turnout, 1998 and 2000	15	3	
Women in Elected Office Composite Index, 2002	40	6	
Women's Institutional Resources, 2002	1	1	
<b>Composite Employment and Earnings Index</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>C+</b>
Women's Median Annual Earnings, 1999	11	3	
Ratio of Women's to Men's Earnings, 1999	30	4	
Women's Labor Force Participation, 1999	33	6	
Women in Managerial and Professional Occupations, 1999	22	6	
<b>Composite Social and Economic Autonomy Index</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>C+</b>
Percent with Health Insurance Among Nonelderly Women, 2000	1	1	
Educational Attainment: Percent of Women with Four or More Years of College, 1990	20	5	
Women's Business Ownership, 1997	31	4	
Percent of Women Above the Poverty Level, 1999	23	5	
<b>Composite Reproductive Rights Index</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>B</b>
<b>Composite Health and Well-Being Index</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>C</b>

See Appendix II *The Status of Women in Rhode Island* 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 six (except for the Political Participation indicators, which do not include the District of Columbia) and refer to the states in the New England region (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, and VT). Calculated by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

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 Rhode Island's commitment to policies designed to help women achieve economic, political, and social well-being. In Rhode Island, women enjoy many of the rights identified with women's well-being, although they lack others. The state has adopted 20 out of 31 possible policies presented in the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist.

Despite Rhode Island's strong performance in certain areas, women in the state have not achieved equality or equity with men. Women in Rhode Island still face significant problems that demand attention from policymakers, women's advocates, and researchers concerned with women's status. The Rhode Island Advisory Committee presents the following policy recommendations for improving women's status:

- ◆ State-level campaign finance reforms, such as public funding, should be adopted to encourage a wider array of candidates, including women and minorities, to run for office.
- ◆ Political parties should encourage women in leadership positions to run for office and should invest resources and offer endorsements on their behalf.
- ◆ Women's wages should be raised by policies such as stronger enforcement of equal employment opportunity laws, improved educational activities, higher minimum

<b>Chart 2 Women's Resources and Rights Checklist</b>				
	Yes	No	Other Information	Total Number of States with Policy (of 51) or U.S. Average
<b>Violence Against Women</b>				
Has Rhode Island adopted a domestic battery statute complementing assault laws?	✓			34
Does Rhode Island law require domestic violence training of new police recruits and health care professionals?		✓	Police only	10
Does Rhode Island law prohibit domestic violence discrimination in insurance?		✓	Life and health insurance only	22
Is a first stalking offense a felony in Rhode Island?	✓			12
Does Rhode Island law require sexual assault training for police, prosecutors, and health care professionals? <sup>1</sup>		✓		4
<b>Child Support</b>				
Percent of single-mother households receiving child support or alimony:			28%	34%
Percent of child support cases with orders for collection in which support was collected:			28%	39%
<b>Welfare and Poverty Policies</b>				
Does Rhode Island extend TANF benefits to children born or conceived while a mother is receiving welfare?	✓			28
Does Rhode Island allow receipt of TANF benefits up to or beyond the 60-month federal time limit?	✓		60-month limit	44
Does Rhode Island allow welfare recipients at least 24 months before requiring participation in work activities?		✓	2 months	13
Does Rhode Island provide transitional child care under TANF for more than 12 months? <sup>2</sup>		✓		14
Has Rhode Island'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 Rhode Island disregard the equivalent of at least 50 percent of earnings from a full-time, minimum wage job?	✓			11
Does Rhode Island have a state Earned Income Tax Credit? <sup>3</sup>	✓			16
Maximum TANF benefit for a family of three (two children) in Rhode Island, 2001:			\$554.00	\$379.00
<b>Employment/Unemployment Benefits</b>				
Is Rhode Island's minimum wage higher than the federal level as of January 2002? <sup>1</sup>	✓		\$6.15	12
Does Rhode Island have mandatory temporary disability insurance?	✓			5
Does Rhode Island provide Unemployment Insurance benefits to:				
Low-wage earners?		✓		14
Workers seeking part-time jobs?		✓		9

*(Continued on next page)*

(Chart 2 continued)	Yes	No	Other Information	Total Number of States with Policy (of 51) or U.S. Average
Workers who leave their jobs for certain circumstances ("good cause quits")? <sup>4</sup>	✓			30
Has Rhode Island implemented adjustments to achieve pay equity in its state civil service?	✓			20
<b>Family Leave Benefits</b>				
Has Rhode Island proposed legislation extending Unemployment Insurance benefits to workers on temporary leave to care for infants and newly adopted children?		✓		0 Enacted; 20 Proposed
Has Rhode Island 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 Rhode Island have civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity? <sup>5</sup>	✓			14
Has Rhode Island adopted legislation creating enhanced penalties or a separate offense for crimes based on sexual orientation?	✓			28
Has Rhode Island avoided adopting a ban on same-sex marriage?	✓			16
<b>Reproductive Rights</b>				
Does Rhode Island allow access to abortion services: Without mandatory parental consent or notification?		✓		8
Without a waiting period?	✓			29
Does Rhode Island provide public funding for abortions under any or most circumstances if a woman is eligible?		✓		16
Does Rhode Island require health insurers to provide comprehensive coverage for contraceptives?	✓			19
Does Rhode Island require health insurers to provide coverage of infertility treatments?	✓			11
Does Rhode Island allow the non-legal parent in a gay/lesbian couple to adopt his/her partner's child? <sup>6</sup>	✓		Lower Court	25
Does Rhode Island require schools to provide sex education? <sup>7</sup>	✓			23
<b>Institutional Resources</b>				
Does Rhode Island have a commission for women?	✓			40
<b>Total Policies</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>11</b>		<b>31 possible</b>

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

<sup>1</sup> Although there is no legislative requirement, all police receive sexual assault training as part of their curriculum. In addition, health care professionals at eight of the state's twelve hospitals received sexual assault training as of April 2002.

<sup>2</sup> All families earning less than 225 percent of the Federal Poverty Level are guaranteed child care assistance regardless of prior TANF status. Former TANF recipients are not guaranteed child care assistance.

<sup>3</sup> Rhode Island's non-refundable EITC is 25.5 percent of the federal EITC.

<sup>4</sup> Rhode Island provides Unemployment Income to workers who leave their jobs due to domestic violence or sexual harassment.

<sup>5</sup> Rhode Island's law bans discrimination on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity.

<sup>6</sup> Most states that allow such adoptions do so as a result of court decisions. In Rhode Island, a lower-level court has ruled in favor of second-parent adoptions.

<sup>7</sup> Rhode Island requires that both abstinence and contraception be taught in its sex education curriculum.

wages, living wage ordinances, or the implementation of pay equity adjustments in the state civil service and in the private sector.

- ◆ Because women are more dependent on Social Security (since they earn less and have fewer and smaller pension plans), and they live longer than men, the state needs to develop effective policies to increase women's economic self-sufficiency later in life.
- ◆ Since women tend to be the primary caregivers, women workers would benefit from the greater provision of high quality, affordable child care and from mandatory paid parental and dependent-care leave policies.
- ◆ Educational opportunities for women of all ages should be created and widely publicized, since higher educational attainment by women results in fewer unwanted pregnancies and lower poverty rates.
- ◆ The state can reduce poverty by implementing welfare reform packages that provide meaningful educational and employment opportunities while maintaining a basic safety net (including health care and child care benefits) for those who are earning low wages or who cannot work.
- ◆ Women's economic security can be improved by greater state emphasis on child support collection and improved access to unemployment insurance, Medicaid, and food stamps.
- ◆ Rhode Island should make a commitment to expand publicly supported contraceptive services for women of all ages.
- ◆ Women must have access to health insurance that includes comprehensive coverage for screenings and other preventive measures, especially since more

women than men receive health insurance from public sources (7.6 percent versus 6.8 percent).

- ◆ Public health efforts need to target early screenings and lifestyle changes to reduce mortality from heart disease, lung cancer, and breast cancer.
- ◆ Special preventive programs need to be targeted to minority populations to address health disparities, especially in heart disease, cancer, and AIDS.
- ◆ The state of Rhode Island should require that all state- and federally-funded programs standardize their reports to ensure that quality data is available by race, ethnicity, gender, and income. These data are essential to monitor the status of all Rhode Islanders and identify successful interventions on behalf of all women in the state.

*The Status of Women in Rhode Island* 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.

### ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S POLICY RESEARCH

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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