

# The Best and Worst States to Be a Woman

Introducing the U.S. Women,  
Peace, and Security Index 2020



**GIWPS**

Georgetown Institute for  
Women, Peace and Security

# Overview

*Our new and comprehensive measure of women’s rights and opportunities in the United States reveals vast differences across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, with Massachusetts at the top, scoring almost four times better than Louisiana at the bottom.*

This first-ever examination of women’s status along the dimensions of inclusion, justice, and security across the 50 states and the District of Columbia reveals vast disparities across place and race. It highlights that much work needs to be done at the federal and state levels to achieve gender equality across the nation. Gender inequalities are compounded by racial and class injustice.

## What is the United States Women, Peace, and Security Index?

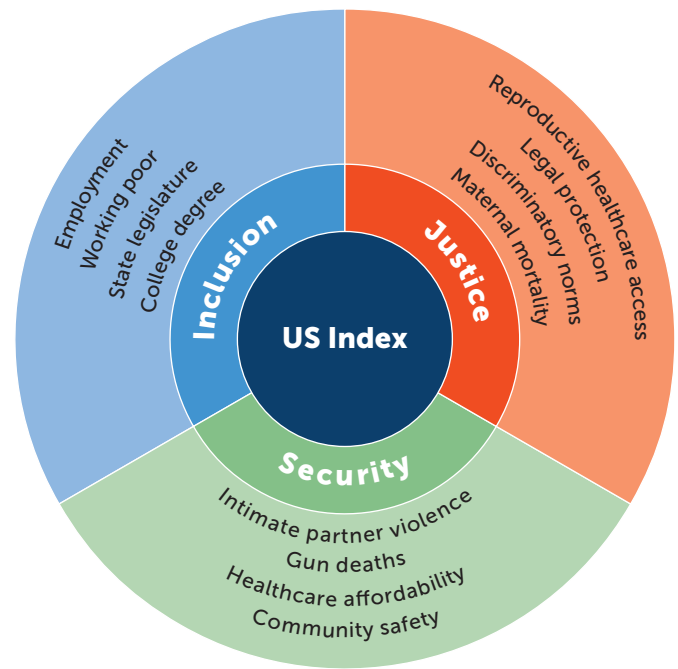
The US WPS Index captures key aspects of women’s status at home, in the community, and in the economy and society.

The index is structured around three basic dimensions: inclusion (economic, social, political); justice (formal laws and informal discrimination); and security (at the individual and community levels; figure 1). The index and its 12 indicators, grouped into these three dimensions, provide a standardized, quantitative, and transparent measure for ranking all states.

## What does the index show?

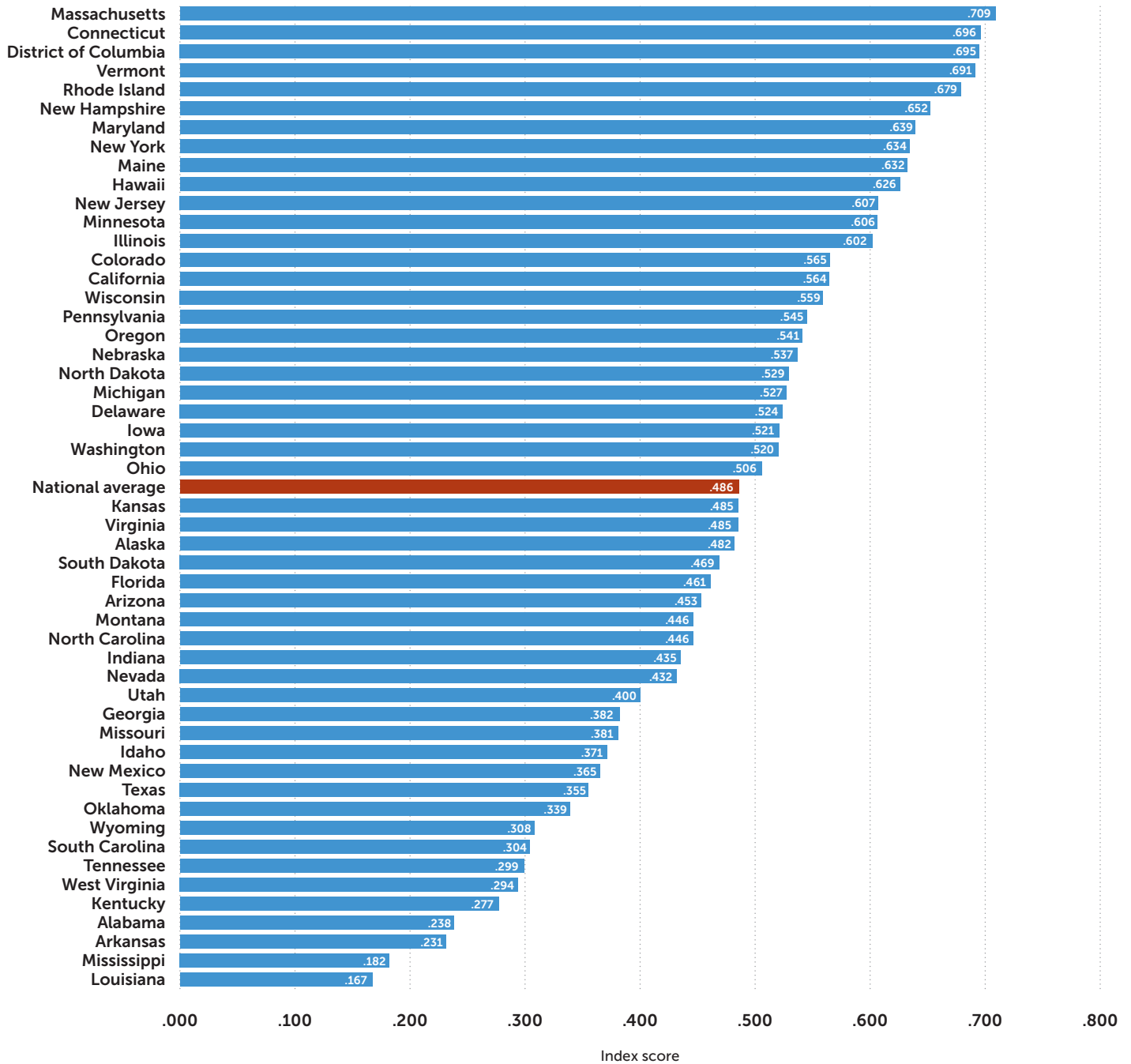
Our new and comprehensive measure of women’s well-being, rights, and opportunities in the United States reveals vast differences across the 50 states and the District of Columbia. There is an enormous range in performance, from Massachusetts at the top (.709) to Louisiana at the bottom (.167), on a 0–1 scale. A full ranking of all states and the District of Columbia is shown in figure 2.

**FIGURE 1 The US Women, Peace, and Security Index: Three dimensions and 12 indicators**



Note: For definitions of indicators see appendix.  
Source: Authors.

**FIGURE 2 State rankings on the US index, 2020**



Note: See statistical table 1 for data sources, dates, and detailed scores.  
 Source: Authors' estimates.

Our analysis reveals key achievements and major deficits behind the striking variation in the index across states.

Some highlights:

First, differences across states are largest for reproductive healthcare access and legal protection. In Wyoming, fewer than 1 in 20 women live in a county with an abortion provider, compared with 19 in 20 women in California,

Connecticut, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia. Only 9 states have mandated paid parental leave, and 16 states have not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment.

Second, major racial disparities affect the status of women in many states—and white women typically do best. Racial gaps are most marked for college degree attainment, maternal mortality, and representation in the state legislature. On

average, 38 percent of white women have completed college, almost double the rate of Native American women. Large disparities also mark maternal mortality—in New Jersey, the maternal mortality rate is 132 deaths per 100,000 live births among Black women, almost four times the rate among white women. In 26 states, there are no Hispanic women represented in the state legislature.

Third, there is some good news. Women are graduating from college at high and rising rates<sup>1</sup> and earn a majority of bachelor's degrees. According to a survey conducted for the Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security in August 2020 by YouGov/PerryUndem, solid majorities of Americans support gender equality and recognize that equality involves equal pay, livable-wage jobs, parental leave, and access to childcare and to affordable healthcare including birth control and the full range of reproductive healthcare services. The survey also reveals that:

- Four in five adults believe that it is important for elected officials to work on issues affecting gender equality.
- About two in three adults believe that the country would be better off with more women in political office and that access to abortion is an important part of women's rights and equality.<sup>2</sup>
- Most adults also recognize that only a minority of women in the United States have access to these services and opportunities. Respondents are especially likely to say that women lack access to affordable childcare—an unmet need that has been exacerbated and brought into sharper relief by the COVID-19 crisis.
- About 83 percent of adults believe that, in light of the COVID-19 crisis, it is just as or even more important that women be paid the same as men for equal work.

Fourth, however, there are major differences in views on multiple aspects of gender equality, especially between women and men and according to race and political affiliation. Figure 3 reflects the diversity of views emerging from the survey's question: *What does gender equality look like to you?* The words in green represent the positive changes respondents want to see, and the words in grey reflect harmful practices that need to end.

Fifth, the index demonstrates that good things often go together. A number of states—from New Hampshire and Massachusetts to California and Oregon—have done well in extending protections and expanding opportunities, and individual attitudes and norms are supportive of gender equality. These 4 states are among the 33 that have ratified the Equal Rights Amendment, signaling support for women's rights and equality. Eleven states, including Connecticut, Hawaii, and Minnesota, as well as the District of Columbia, score in the top two quintiles on inclusion, justice, and security. However, New Hampshire is the only state that performs well (in the top two quintiles) for all 12 of the US WPS indicators.

Sixth, there are clear patterns in regional performance. For example, all 6 states in the Northeast region are among

### FIGURE 3 What does gender equality look like to you?

Responses to the question: What does gender equality look like to you? In other words, how would you know that we've reached full gender equality in our country?



Note: Larger text size corresponds to more frequent responses.  
Source: Klugman et al. forthcoming.

the 10 best performing states nationally, while all 5 of the worst performing states are in the Southeast region.<sup>3</sup> Yet location is not a sole determinant: there are major differences within regions. Thus, while Colorado ranks 14th overall, its neighbors, Utah and Wyoming, rank 36th and 43rd.

Seventh, women face serious justice and security constraints:

- In 37 states, domestic abusers subject to protective orders are not required to relinquish firearms.
- In 44 states, there is no legislated minimum wage above the low-income threshold.<sup>4</sup>
- In 17 states, including Arizona, Arkansas, and Idaho, at least one in three men believe that it is better for men to be the breadwinner while women tend to the home, revealing adverse norms that obstruct women's economic opportunities.<sup>5</sup>
- In 17 states, fewer than half of women feel safe walking alone at night within a mile of their neighborhood.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, money matters, with state per capita GDP associated with better index scores. Nonetheless, some states do far better on the US WPS Index—or far worse—than their per capita income rank, suggesting that money is not the whole

story. For example, Maine ranks 44th in per capita GDP but 9th on the index—a 35-place gap. Wyoming, on the other hand, ranks 34 places lower on the index than its GDP per capita rank (see statistical table 3).

### **Ways forward**

Looking ahead, establishing women’s rights in laws that ensure safety at home and at work and that promote equality and inclusion is essential. Because such protection is not comprehensive at the national level, there is enormous variation across the United States. The state in which a woman lives determines her ability to file a workplace sexual harassment claim, her level of protection from an abusive partner, and her ability to take paid time off for caregiving. And these protections are just with respect to the laws on paper and do not take into account the potential costs and obstacles to enforcement of rights.

Racial and class injustice exacerbate gender inequalities and vice versa. Black, Hispanic, and Native American women are paid less than men and white women for the same work,

are less likely than white women to hold a high school or college degree, and more likely than white women to be living in poverty, be part of the working poor, and not to receive health insurance through their employer.

Closing gaps is a priority. The federal government needs to provide fuller legal protections and stronger social safety nets. The federal and state governments can play a critical role to ensure that the intersectional challenges across gender, race, and class lines are recognized and addressed, not denied. The persistence of gendered and racial economic disparities limits economic growth in good times and even more so in bad times. These disparities have been exposed and exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis, accentuating the need to address racial justice in efforts to advance gender equality.

Activists, advocacy networks, and researchers, along with leaders inside and outside government, have been working hard for many years to advance this agenda. We hope that this and future editions of the US WPS Index help hold decisionmakers to account and guide efforts to advance the status of all women and girls in the United States.

*Major racial disparities affect the status of women in many states—and white women typically do best.*

# THE STATE OF WOMEN

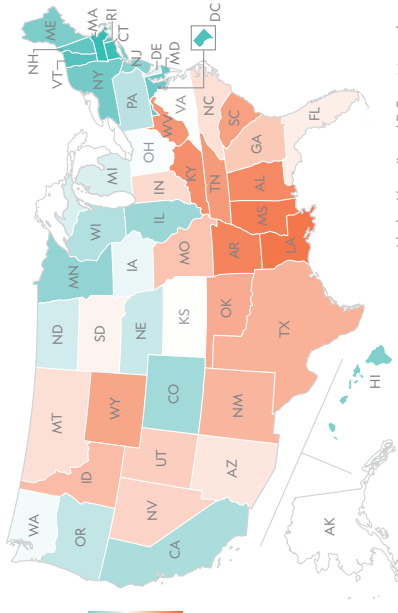
BY IRENE BERMAN-VAPORIS, LAWSON PARKER, AND ROSEMARY WARDLEY

**Employment • Education • Maternal mortality • Political clout • Physical safety**  
 How U.S. women fare in these key aspects of life varies widely across the nation, according to a new benchmark of women's well-being. The 2020 U.S. Women, Peace and Security Index measures women's inclusion in society, sense of security, and exposure to discrimination. It shows how obstacles and opportunities for women differ from state to state, driven by economic, racial, and ethnic disparities, among other factors. National Geographic partnered with the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security to illustrate the U.S. index.

The index measures three categories, each composed of four subcategories.

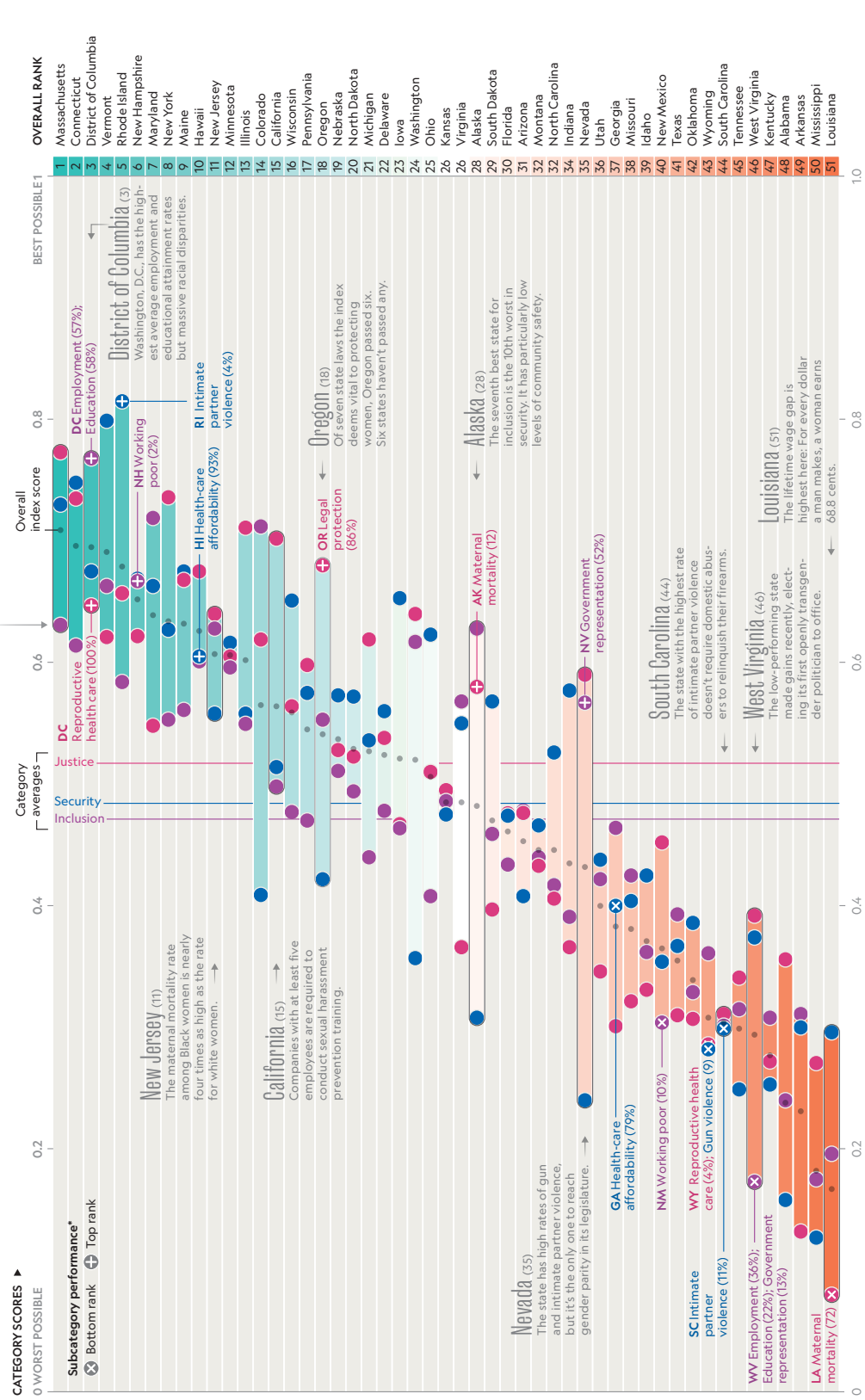
- Inclusion
- Justice
- Security

- National average**
  - 43%** Employment: Women age 16 and older who work 35 hours or more every week
  - 33%** Education: Women age 25 and older who have a bachelor's degree or higher
  - 30%** Government representation: Seats held by women in both chambers of the state legislature
  - 6%** Working poor: Poverty among women who worked 27 weeks or more in the past year
  - 2.5** Legal protection: Number of key laws (out of seven) enacted to protect women's rights
  - 28%** Discriminatory norms: Men age 18 and older who say it's better if women work within the home
  - 62%** Reproductive health care: Women living in a county with a clinic that provides abortion services
  - 30** Maternal mortality: Deaths per 100,000 live births from any cause related to pregnancy
  - 3** Gun violence: Deaths per 100,000 women from gun-related homicides or suicides in the past year
  - 7%** Intimate partner violence: Physically or sexually harmed or stalked in the past year by a partner
  - 86%** Health-care affordability: Women who visited a doctor in the past year without financial difficulty
  - 56%** Community safety: Women age 18 and older who aren't afraid to walk alone at night in their neighborhood



No place in the country achieves the best or worst possible score. All six New England states rank in the top 10; the five lowest performing states are located in the South.

**Massachusetts (RANK: 1)**  
 Proactive legislative reforms in the state, including an equal pay act updated in 2018, have helped close gender gaps.



Alaska, Hawaii, and DC, not to scale