



The Economic Status of Women in Colorado

This briefing paper assesses women's economic status in Colorado, drawing comparisons with other states in the Mountain West region and the nation overall. It examines how women in Colorado fare on two composite indices—Employment & Earnings, and Poverty & Opportunity—and their component indicators. (For more on these indicators and IWPR's *Status of Women in the States* initiative, see Appendix I or visit www.statusofwomendata.org.) The briefing paper also considers how women's status in Colorado has changed over the last decade, highlights differences across age and racial and ethnic groups, and identifies policy recommendations to further improve women's status.

Key Findings

Women in Colorado, as in the nation overall, have made substantial progress toward economic equality over the last several decades, but still lag behind men in important ways. Women earn less than their male counterparts, are more likely to live in poverty, and are less likely to own businesses. Even in areas where women's status has advanced, there is room for improvement.

- If Colorado women earned the same as comparable men, the poverty rate for all working women would be cut in half and the state economy would grow by an additional \$9.2 billion or 3.0 percent of the state's GDP in 2014.
- Pay equity remains elusive: if progress continues at the current rate since 1960, the state's gender wage gap will not close until the year 2057.
- Disparities across racial and ethnic groups persist, indicating that women's progress has been unequally distributed. Hispanic women in Colorado earn about half of their white male counterpart's earnings, at 53.8 cents on the dollar, and black women earn only 65.5 cents on the dollar.
- Women are more likely than men to live in poverty in Colorado (13.0 percent of women, compared with 10.0 percent of men). A considerable share of households headed by single mothers with children under 18 in Colorado—36.5 percent, or 45,171 households—live in poverty.

Policy Recommendations

Women in Colorado face substantial challenges that demand attention from policymakers, advocates, employers, and funders alike. While on many indicators of women's status Colorado fares relatively well compared with states across the nation, women in Colorado continue to

experience inequities that often prevent them from reaching their full potential. Policies and programs designed to diminish gender- and race-based inequalities should be at the forefront of local and state policymaking efforts.

Recommended actions to improve women's economic status in Colorado include:

- Hold employers accountable for their obligation to monitor hiring, selection, and promotions and review pay and grading decisions to identify gender and race disparities. Make 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.
- Enforce existing legislation related to workplace and educational equity and discrimination, and develop new statutes that address barriers to equality, such as lack of work/family supports and the unequal treatment of part-time workers. Educate policymakers about the important role that work supports, such as paid sick days, play in ensuring that women can participate successfully in their local economies.
- Facilitate access to further education by providing supports for those who face financial and other barriers to completing a degree. Make educational opportunities for Hispanic, Native American, and black women a particular focus of investment in scholarship and grant programs.
- Ensure that career advice for women and girls explicitly addresses the earnings potential of different fields of study and occupations. Increase opportunities for women to pursue careers in higher-paying technical fields, and monitor vocational and education and training programs to ensure that there is active outreach and support for women pursuing nontraditional careers.
- Encourage local governments to adopt regional or county-level Self-Sufficiency Standards, such as those developed by the Center for Women's Welfare, which assess the wages needed for a basic standard of living that includes all family expenses such as child care and housing. Such measures would serve well as an income eligibility guideline for programs and policies designed to help families achieve economic security.
- Ensure that federal, state, and local government contracts are accessible to women-owned businesses, and make public and private sector investments in loan and entrepreneurial programs that expand small business opportunities for all. Offer technical assistance to women entrepreneurs that helps them to identify opportunities for successful and profitable businesses.

About the Report

This briefing paper, funded by The Women's Foundation of Colorado, is based on IWPR's national *Status of Women in the States: 2015* project supported by the Ford Foundation, the American Federation of Teachers, the Women's Funding Network, and other state and national organizations. The briefing paper was prepared by Yana Mayayeva, Julie Anderson, M.A., Cynthia Hess, Ph.D., and Jessica Milli, Ph.D.