



FAST FACTS:

Economic Security for Women and Families in West Virginia

By Diana Boesch and Carolyn Sabini | August 5, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the vital role women play in our economy and in the economic security of families, both nationally and in West Virginia. Now more than ever, lawmakers in West Virginia must do better to ensure all women and families have quality reproductive health care, safe workplaces, equal representation in government, and economic security.

Women need policies that reflect their roles as providers and caregivers—roles that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated are critical to the well-being of families, communities, and the economy.¹ In West Virginia, mothers are the sole, primary, or co-breadwinners in 63.8 percent of families,² and these numbers are higher for some mothers of color across the United States.

The following policy recommendations can help support the economic security of women and families in West Virginia.

Promote equal pay for equal work

Although federal law prohibits unequal pay for equal work, there is more that can be done to ensure that both women and men across West Virginia enjoy the fullest protections against discrimination.

- In 2019, West Virginia women who were full-time, year-round workers earned about 76 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts;³ if the wage gap continues to close at its current rate, women will not reach parity in the state until 2099.⁴ The wage gap is even larger for Black women and Latinas in the state, both of whom earned only 63 cents for every dollar earned by white men from 2015 to 2019.⁵
- Due to the gender wage gap, each woman in West Virginia will lose an average of \$447,920 over the course of her lifetime.⁶

Increase the minimum wage

Women constitute a disproportionate share of low-wage workers; raising the minimum wage would help hardworking women across West Virginia and enable them to better support their families.

- Women make up about two-thirds of all minimum-wage workers in the United States.⁷ More than 60 percent of all minimum wage workers in West Virginia are women.⁸
- In West Virginia, the current minimum wage is \$8.75 per hour.⁹ The minimum wage for workers who receive tips is \$2.62 per hour.¹⁰ Notably, 73 percent of tipped-wage workers in West Virginia are women.¹¹
- Increasing the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2025 would boost wages for 153,000 women in West Virginia and 19 million women nationally.¹² Sixty-one percent of West Virginia workers who would be affected by raising the minimum wage to \$15 are women.¹³

Guarantee access to quality health care

Women need access to comprehensive health services—including abortion care, contraceptives, and maternal health care—in order to thrive as breadwinners, caregivers, and employees. To ensure women are able to access high-quality care, states should, at minimum, implement measures to reduce racial and other disparities in pregnancy-related morbidity and mortality; protect and improve their Medicaid programs; strengthen family planning programs and expand contraceptive access; and end onerous restrictions that reduce access to abortion care and undermine the patient-provider relationship.

At the state level, West Virginia should ensure that women have access to the full spectrum of quality, affordable, and women-centered reproductive health services.

- **Maternal health:** Certain communities experience higher maternal and infant mortality and morbidity; namely, Black and Indigenous people are, nationally, about three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications. Additionally, in rural areas—where approximately 38 percent of West Virginians reside¹⁴—pregnant people face further challenges when seeking care due to increasing rural hospital closures and obstetric providers shortages.¹⁵ Indeed, the impact of these disparities are borne out in West Virginia's pregnancy-related mortality rate:¹⁶ 21.4 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2017, well above the national rate of 17.3 deaths per 100,000 live births that same year.¹⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed both deep racial inequities in health and health care¹⁸ and the fragility of rural health care

infrastructure, both of which have the potential to directly and adversely affect the health of pregnant people in West Virginia if swift, decisive action is not taken to improve access to and outcomes of care.

- **Family planning:** In 2014, more than 110,000 women in West Virginia were in need of publicly funded family planning services and supplies, and 15 percent of those women were uninsured.¹⁹ In addition, more than 65,000 women in West Virginia live in contraceptive deserts, counties that lack reasonable access to a health center that offers the full range of contraceptive methods.²⁰
- **Title X:** The nation's only domestic federal family planning program—which provides reproductive and preventive care such as contraception, sexually transmitted infection testing, and breast and cervical cancer screenings—served about 44,000 women in West Virginia in 2019, down from 66,500 women in 2016.²¹ An estimated 1,300 contraceptive patients lost access to Title X services as a result of the Trump administration's domestic gag rule.²² West Virginia's Title X funding has also fallen, from \$2.64 million in 2017 to \$2.3 million in 2019.²³
- **Abortion:** West Virginia bars state public funds from covering abortion care except in cases of rape, incest, impairment of the fetus, or grave threat to the pregnant person's life or physical health.²⁴ Both the use of dilation and evaluation—a common, safe, and effective method of abortion in the second trimester—and the use of telemedicine to administer abortion care are prohibited in West Virginia.²⁵

Ensure workers have access to paid sick days

Everyone gets sick, but not everyone is afforded the time to get better. For instance, many women go to work sick because they fear that they will be fired for missing work. Allowing employees to earn paid sick days helps keep families, communities, and the economy healthy.

- More than 30 million U.S. employees, or 25 percent of the nation's private sector workforce, do not have access to paid sick days.²⁶ In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which provided workers up to two weeks of emergency paid sick leave to recover from COVID-19, quarantine, care for a family member sick with COVID-19, or care for a child whose school or place of care was closed.²⁷ This also expanded emergency paid sick leave in West Virginia, covering up to 270,000 private sector workers in the state.²⁸ However, the emergency paid sick leave tax credits became voluntary in 2021, emphasizing the need for a state or federal law guaranteeing workers access to paid sick leave.

Ensure fair scheduling practices

Many workers in low-paid jobs—64 percent of whom are women²⁹—face erratic work schedules and have little control over when they work and for how long.

- Seventeen percent of the workforce has unstable work schedules, with irregular and on-call work shift times or split or rotating shifts.³⁰ Hourly and low-wage workers are more likely to face irregular work schedules.³¹ This can be especially difficult for parents who need to plan for child care.
- In addition to threatening the economic security of these workers and their families, unfair scheduling practices are often accompanied by reduced access to health benefits and increased potential for sexual harassment.³²

Provide access to paid family and medical leave

Access to paid family and medical leave would allow workers to be with their newborn children during the critical early stages of the child's life; to care for an aging family member; to recover from their own serious illness; or to assist in a loved one's recovery from a serious illness or injury.

- Only 20 percent of private sector workers in the United States have access to paid family leave through their employers.³³
- Unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is inaccessible to 59 percent of working people in West Virginia.³⁴ Workers and families in the state need paid family and medical leave for reasons other than childbirth. For example, nearly 1 in 4 workers in West Virginia are at least 55 years old, and in roughly 20 years, the share of the state's population that is 65 and older will grow by one-seventh.³⁵ West Virginia's aging population means an increase in older adults with serious medical conditions who will need additional care.
- National survey data on the FMLA show that 51 percent of employees who took leave in the last 12 months did so for personal medical reasons.³⁶ Meanwhile, 25 percent of workers used leave to care for a new child, while another 24 percent used it to care for a family member.³⁷

Expand quality, affordable child care

Families need child care to ensure they are able to work, but many lack access to affordable, high-quality child care options that support young children's development and meet the needs of working families.

- Sixty percent of West Virginia children under the age of 6 have all available parents in the workforce, which makes access to affordable, high-quality child care a necessity.³⁸
- For a West Virginia family with one infant and one 4-year-old, the annual price of a child care center averages \$15,990 per year,³⁹ or almost one-third of the median income for a family in West Virginia with children.⁴⁰
- West Virginia is ahead of the national average of children enrolled in public preschool, with about 69 percent of 4-year-olds enrolled.⁴¹
- Sixty-four percent of West Virginia families with a child under 6 live in a child care desert, where there is not nearly enough child care to meet demand.⁴²

Protect workers against all forms of gender-based violence

Women cannot fully participate in the economy if they face the threat of violence and harassment. There are a number of steps lawmakers can take to prevent violence against women and to support survivors, including establishing greater workplace accountability; strengthening enforcement; increasing funding for survivor support services; and educating the public on sexual harassment in the workplace.⁴³

- In West Virginia, 32 percent of women have experienced contact sexual violence in their lifetimes, and 31 percent of women have experienced noncontact sexual harassment.⁴⁴ Given that research at the national level suggests that as many as 70 percent of sexual harassment charges go unreported, these state numbers likely only scratch the surface.⁴⁵
- About 39 percent of West Virginia women have experienced intimate partner violence, which can include physical violence, sexual violence, or stalking by an intimate partner.⁴⁶ Experiencing intimate partner violence has been shown to hinder women's economic potential in many ways, such as loss of pay from missed days of work and housing instability.⁴⁷

Protect the rights of incarcerated women

The growing problem of mass incarceration in the United States hinders the economic potential of those affected and disproportionately harms communities of color.⁴⁸ Incarceration can have a particularly destabilizing effect on families with an incarcerated mother, especially if that woman is a breadwinner. The experience of incarceration is also uniquely traumatic for women in ways that can deter long-term economic security, even after release.⁴⁹

- The incarceration rate in West Virginia is 381 per 100,000 people.⁵⁰ Approximately 12 percent of prisoners in West Virginia are women.⁵¹
- Women are the fastest-growing segment of the overall U.S. prison population in the past few decades, especially in state prisons and local jails.⁵² Yet a report from U.S. Department of Justice found that federal prisons have not effectively managed their oversight of carceral settings for women,⁵³ and a U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report found that, as of 2018, the rate of sexual assault while incarcerated was substantially higher for women than men—and that women have fewer substantive opportunities than men to participate in rehabilitative or educational programs while incarcerated.⁵⁴
- Incarcerated women suffer from a wide range of abuses at the hands of the prison system, including lack of access to menstrual hygiene products; lack of adequate nutrition and prenatal care; shackling during pregnancy and childbirth; and separation and further disruption from children for whom they are primary caregivers.⁵⁵

Promote women's political leadership

Across the United States, women are underrepresented in political office: They constitute 51 percent of the population but only 31 percent of elected officials.⁵⁶

- Women make up 51 percent of West Virginia's population⁵⁷ but only 25 percent of its elected officials.⁵⁸
- Women of color constitute nearly 4 percent of the state's population⁵⁹ but only 1 percent of its officeholders.⁶⁰

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