



# Biennial Report

2018 - 2020



WASHINGTON STATE  
WOMEN'S COMMISSION





# Our Vision

*Every woman and girl is healthy, safe, prosperous, and empowered to achieve their full potential.*

## Our Mission

The Washington State Women's Commission improves the life of every woman and girl by ensuring equitable opportunities and removing systemic barriers through engagement, advocacy, and public policy, while being inclusive of our diverse populations.

## Statutory Authority

With bipartisan support and companion Senate Bill 6583, the legislature passed HB 2759 on March 15, 2018 because of the importance of achieving equal opportunity for all citizens. The legislature found that women face unique problems and needs. The development of public policy and the efficient delivery of governmental services to meet the needs of women is improved by the Women's Commission being the focal point for the interests of women in state government.



### **The Washington State Women's Commission**

On March 15, 2018 House Bill 2759 was signed into law by Governor Jay Inslee, establishing the Washington State Women's Commission.



# Who We Are

## Leadership



### **Jay Inslee**

Governor of Washington

It is long overdue to have a commission dedicated to improving the lives of women in Washington, the commission's work is more important than ever. The commission is a valuable resource and provides recommendations and advice to my office, the Legislature and state agencies on issues important to all women.



### **Regina Malveaux, J.D.**

Director of the Washington State Women's Commission

The Commission is proud to be a voice for women and girls in Washington state. Our role: advocating on their behalf with the Governor, the Legislature and other public policymakers to ensure that every woman and girl is empowered to live her best life, free of barriers, violence and inequity. Together change is possible.



### **Michelle Merriweather**

Chair of the Washington State Women's Commission

I am honored to serve as Chair of the Washington State Women's Commission. The Commission is unapologetic about uplifting the voices, concerns, and issues of all women across Washington State, especially those that often are not heard, are overlooked, and under-represented.

# Who We Are

## Commissioners & Legislative Advisors



**Michelle Merriweather | CHAIR**  
President & CEO, Urban League  
of Metropolitan Seattle



**Graciela Gomez Cowger | PAST CHAIR**  
CEO, Schwabe Williamson & Wyatt



**Rituja Indapure | VICE CHAIR**  
Manager, eCom Fulfillment, Costco



**Quinn Dalan | SECRETARY**  
Executive Director, Yakima County  
Volunteer Attorney Services



**Jackie Boschok**  
President, WA State Alliance  
for Retired Americans



**Anna Franklin**  
Director of Clinical Effectiveness,  
Providence



**Grace Huang**  
Director of Policy, Asian Pacific  
Institute on Gender-Based Violence



**Vicki Lowe**  
Executive Director, American Indian  
Health Commission for Washington State



**Dawn Rains**  
Executive Vice President and  
Chief Policy and Strategy Officer,  
Treehouse

Past Commissioners: Tara Fairfield, Monica Holland



**Representative Beth Doglio (D)**



**Representative Mary Dye (R)**



**Senator Lisa Wellman (D)**



**Senator Ann Rivers (R)**



“

I raise up my voice-not to shout but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.

— *Malala Yousafzai*



# Critical Issues Facing Women & Girls In Washington State

**The Washington State Women's Commission recognizes that women and girls in Washington State face unique challenges.**

This year, through the following areas, the Commission is focused on aiding women's overall recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 which disproportionately affected women and girls at all ages and particularly negatively impacted women and girls of color.



**Health**



**Safety**



**Economic  
Security**



**Economic  
Opportunity**

# Health



The pandemic has further exposed the health inequalities faced by women, particularly women of color. Living at the intersection of racial and gender inequities in the built environment and social determinants of health, women of color often experience disproportionately poor health outcomes across health measures.

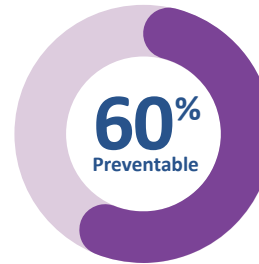
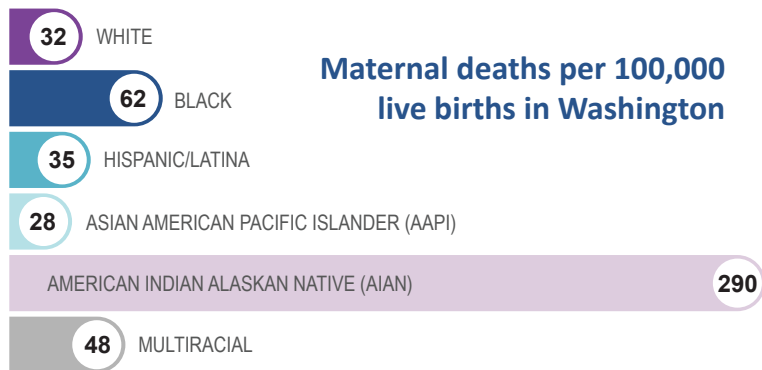
The Commission is working toward ensuring women and girls can live healthier lives by addressing the growing disparities in health equity.

Issues of particular concern include healthcare access & affordability, quality of care, mental healthcare access, and maternal & child health.

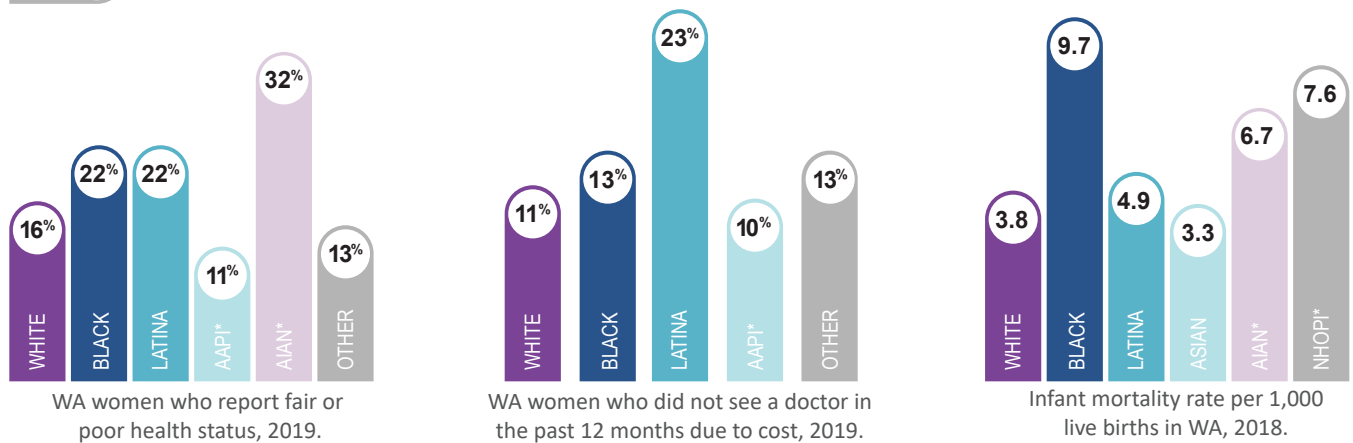


# Health

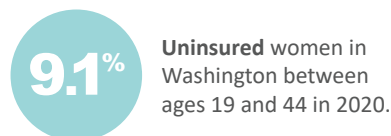
View source data and more at [www.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/health](https://www.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/health).



In their most recent Maternal Mortality Review (2019), the Department of Health identified **30 pregnancy-related deaths** from 2014-16 in WA, and determined that **60% of those deaths were preventable**.



\*AIAN (American Indian, Alaskan Native), AAPI (Asian American, Pacific Islander), NHOPI (Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander)



Women are **twice as likely** to experience PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and depression in their lifetime than men.

**2x**

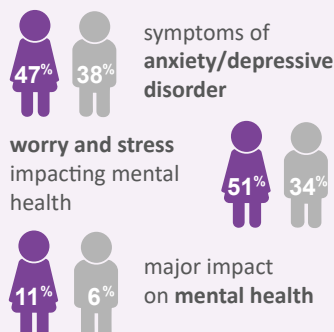


## COVID-19 IMPACT

There is an **urgent need for better data**, as racial and ethnic information needed to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on communities of color has been inconsistent, underreported, or misclassified.

As a result, women of color, who face the compounded harms and challenges of their intersectional identities, are especially likely to face amplified inequity as a result of the pandemic.

In response to COVID-19, U.S. women were more likely to report experiencing:



**73%**



of health care workers infected with COVID-19 in the U.S. were **women**.

# Safety



Women and girls of all ages, income levels, racial and ethnic communities, sexual orientations, and gender identities continue to experience violence in the form of domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, trafficking, and gun violence.

The Commission is working with our community partners to find policy and practical solutions to these serious issues to help prevent violence, provide adequate services for survivors and eradicate all forms of gender-based violence.

## Safety

View source data and more at [www.wswc.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/safety](https://www.wswc.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/safety).



On September 10, 2020, as part of a 24-hour survey conducted by the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), **51 domestic violence programs** in Washington State fielded **541 hotline contacts**, averaging **23 per hour**.



In the NNEDV's 24-hour survey, **603 victim requests for services** (including emergency shelter, housing, transportation, childcare, and legal representation) **remained unmet** because programs lacked the resources to meet their needs. **62% of these unmet requests were for housing or emergency shelter.**

**4 in 5**

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) women (84.3%) in the U.S.

have experienced violence in their lifetime. Overall, more than 1.5 million AIAN women have experienced violence in their lifetime.

Washington State ranks second in the nation in highest number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons cases. Although 1.9% of the state population is Indigenous, Indigenous persons make up 6% of the state's active missing persons reports. The actual number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is likely much higher, as Indigenous persons are often inaccurately reported, underreported, and misclassified in law enforcement databases and media.



**45%**

of women in Washington State have experienced sexual violence during their lifetime.

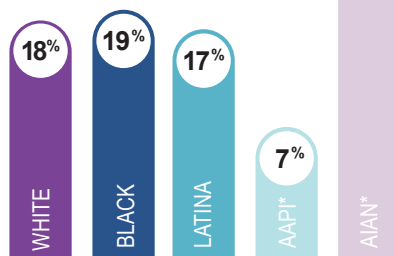


**5x**

Access to a gun makes it **five times more likely that a woman in the U.S. will die** at the hands of a domestic abuser.

**4.5 million women** in the U.S. have reported being threatened with a gun by an intimate partner. Every month, an average of 57 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner.

As many as **83%** of women in Washington State with developmental disabilities have been **victims of sexual assault.**



Prevalence of **rape and sexual assault** by race/ethnicity, in Washington State.

\*AAPI (Asian American, Pacific Islander)  
AIAN (American Indian, Alaskan Native)

## COVID-19 IMPACT



The National Domestic Violence Hotline found that **one in three** hotline callers in the first half of 2020 experienced economic abuse.



The economic impact of COVID-19 further **endangered survivors who were often trapped with abusive partners** without resources to leave and with reduced access to supports like shelter and civil courts.



Survivors reported that abusive partners had used pandemic restrictions **to prevent them from seeing family, including their children.** Widespread closures made it more difficult for survivors to reach out for help and connection.



# Economic Security



Women and girls in Washington deserve financial stability. Access to financial assistance, affordable housing, quality childcare, and food security are foundational to the wellbeing of women, their families, and their communities.

The Women's Commission is committed to removing barriers for low income women, especially those who have caregiving responsibilities, and to investing in infrastructure that lifts women and their families out of poverty.

## Economic Security

View source data and more at [www.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/economic-security](https://www.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/economic-security).

**10.9%**

Women in Washington State between ages 18 - 64 were **living at or below the federal poverty level** in 2019.

**26%**

of more than **274,000** households that are headed by women in WA State live at or below the federal poverty level.

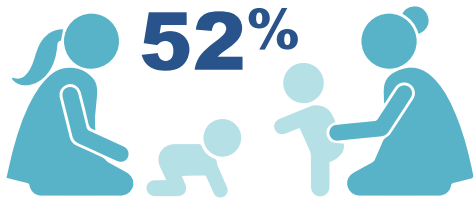
**49.3%**

In 2017, of the 311,716 women and children in Washington State eligible for the WIC program, only 49.3% participated.

### Only 33 Units



For every 100 extremely low income households in the U.S. who make less than 30% of the median income in their area, there are **only 33 units** that are affordable and available.



**52%**

Only 52% of eligible children accessed Washington State's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) or Head Start in 2019. Children in families living at or below 110% of the federal poverty line are eligible for ECEAP and federal programs like Early Head Start and Head Start.



**157,461**

There is a **deficit of 157,461** rental homes in WA State that are affordable and available to extremely low income renters, **despite making up 21% of renter households**.

**4 in 10**

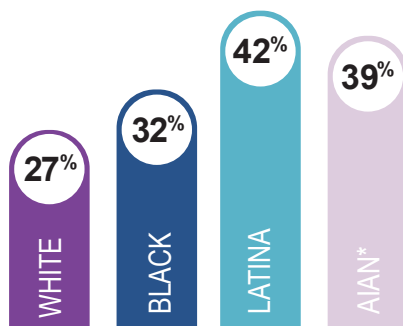


low income people in WA State are **homeless or pay over half or more of their income towards rent**.



**Poverty disproportionately impacts communities of color.**

According to 2019 Washington data, about **21%** of American Indian and Alaskan Natives are living at or below the federal poverty threshold; **16.3%** of African Americans; and **16%** of Hispanic/Latinxs.



Single mothers in WA State living below the federal poverty level, 2019

\*AIAN (American Indian, Alaskan Native)

## COVID-19 IMPACT



**25%**

of women in Washington who became unemployed during the pandemic reported the job loss was due to a lack of childcare, **twice the rate of men surveyed** from May and June 2020.

**6 in 10**

children in Washington State were without access to care at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.



# Economic Opportunity



Equal pay, digital equity, and access to employment and leadership opportunities are essential to women's economic advancement.

As providers, caretakers, and essential drivers of our state's economy, women should be empowered to participate and advance in the workforce free from the barriers that women, and especially women of color, have historically faced.

The Commission is committed to advocating for policies that empower women in the workplace and to creating more equitable environments in which women can thrive.



# Economic Opportunity

View source data and more at [www.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/economic-opportunity](https://www.wa.gov/about-us/committee-priorities/economic-opportunity).

## 34th

Washington State's rank in the nation in gender pay parity, with women on average making **22% less** in their annual earnings than men.

## 78.2¢

The amount women make for every dollar that a white man makes. **The gender pay gap in Washington State has widened** since 2014, when it was 81¢ per dollar.



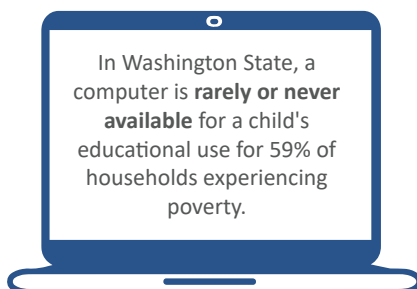
\*AIAN (American Indian, Alaskan Native)



A key aspect to education access and economic opportunity for women, girls, and their families is **closing the digital equity gap**.



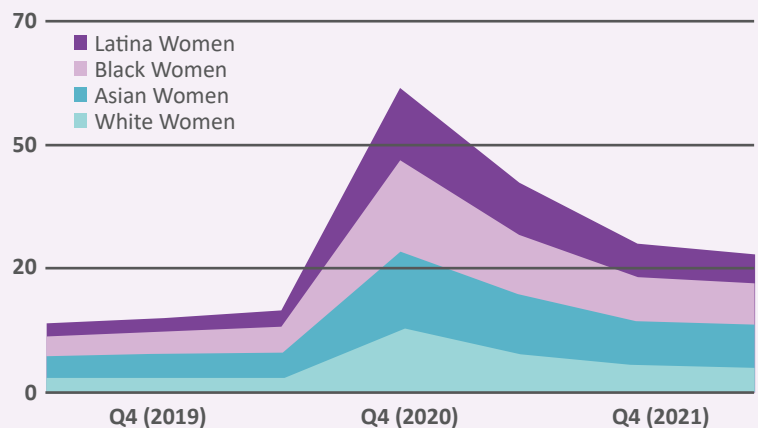
Low-income and Black populations in Washington face **disproportionate barriers** to accessing tech equipment and the internet in their homes.



## COVID-19 IMPACT

### Unemployment Rates

For Women, by race and Hispanic/Latina ethnicity in Washington



## 4x

more women than men dropped out of the U.S. workforce in September 2020.

## 5%

predicted increase in wage gap after pandemic recession.

# Our Approach

Advocating for women and girls.

## What We Do

The Washington State Women's Commission approaches our four key issue areas through the following efforts.

- Legislative Advocacy
- Information Gathering/Research
- Public & Private Partnerships
- Community Outreach
- Resource Referral



## How We Do It

We accomplish this through four committees which focus on the following issues:



### Health Committee

- COVID-19 Pandemic Response
- Health Disparities
- Maternal and Child Health Disparities
- Mental health Access



### Safety Committee

- Domestic Violence
- Sexual Assault
- Sexual Harassment
- Trafficking
- Gun Violence



### Economic Security Committee

- Poverty
- Childcare Access and Affordability
- Affordable Housing



### Economic Opportunity Committee

- Pay Equity
- Living Wage Career Pathways
- Digital Equity
- Alternative Workplace Options
- Leadership and Mentorship Opportunities

# A New Listening Forum Series

**A new series providing valuable insight into the unique challenges faced by women, especially by women of color, across Washington.**

In response to the disproportionate impact COVID-19 had on women, including the resulting 'she-cession' that saw the mass departure of women from the workforce, the Washington State Women's Commission hosted a virtual Listening Forum in March of 2021.

This open format Forum allowed Commissioners and Staff to hear directly from women across the state about their experiences during the pandemic and how it impacted their lives and work.

## Key Findings

- Women left the workplace due to lack of childcare.
- Women and families faced job and health insurance loss.
- Small business owners, including undocumented entrepreneurs and gig workers, struggled to keep their businesses afloat.
- Working women, particularly those with children, struggled to maintain work/life balance.
- Victims of domestic violence experienced economic instability and a lack of social support while often being trapped with their abusers.
- Women experienced increased rates of depression, substance misuse, and other mental health concerns.
- Access to relief funding was delayed, particularly within communities of color, to immigrants, and to refugees.
- The pandemic illuminated existing societal disparities, particularly around issues of racism.
- Families were helped by cash assistance, increased food assistance, and childcare relief grants.
- As much of the workforce shifted to digital communications, the digital equity divide grew larger and the importance of technology & broadband access for all Washingtonians became more apparent.

“ [As a small business], we help our economy run. We support so many other small businesses, since we source all of our grapes from small growers in Washington state. Our accountant, our insurance, our glass provider, our boxes to ship- all of our sources are small businesses here in Washington state. So certainly this type of public crisis has really hit small businesses very hard.

- *Emily Fergestrom*  
*Owner, Fortuity Cellars*

“ Art is essential. Art is not just something that you put on as entertainment...What we saw during COVID, was the fact that gig workers and solo entrepreneurs and artists...there aren't any mechanisms to really help them if they don't have a gig. We really had to fight for unemployment for them, and we really had to fight because some of them don't have health care.

- *Sharon Williams*  
*Executive Director,*  
*Central District Art Forum*

“ We started holding these drop-in community circles on Zoom...and there were such outpourings of grief. The layers, the intersection of all these systems, of all these different pains. [The virus] was able to just reveal all these existing schisms, all these existing gaps.

- *Dashni Amin*  
*Program Coordinator,*  
*Collective Justice NW*



# Highlights

A reflection on success and how we choose to forge ahead.



## Model Policies for Sexual Harassment

All women in Washington deserve a safe work environment, but some small business employers lack the resources to appropriately address the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace. The Women's Commission worked with pro bono employment attorneys of Gordon Rees' Seattle office to develop a model sexual harassment policy intended for small employers who may not have a Human Resources department. The Model Policies are available in seven languages on the Women's Commission website at [www.wswc.wa.gov/resources](https://www.wswc.wa.gov/resources).



## Women on Corporate Boards

A measure of economic parity is equitable gender representation on corporate boards. As part of its legislative mandate the Commission provided guidance to the legislature on best practices related to the issue of women on corporate boards. The Commission then championed Senate bill 5142 revising the Washington business corporation act to increase equitable gender representation on corporate boards. Working with the Secretary of State the Commission is charged with monitoring the progress of implementation of publicly traded companies headquartered in Washington.



## Fair Start For Kids Act

Childcare and early learning programs are essential for working women and for our state's economic future. The COVID-19 pandemic escalated already existing barriers to women's economic participation. The Commission was a proud supporter of the landmark "Fair Start for Kids Act" signed into law by Governor Inslee on May 7, 2021. The new law will help build a better childcare system for workers, families and the whole state of Washington.



## Key 2021 Legislative Priorities

Each year the Commission crafts a legislative agenda focused on education and advocacy on issues aligned with our strategic framework with the input of our commissioners, legislative partners, and Commission staff. This year, the Commission focused on aiding women's overall recovery from the COVID-19 impacts, which affected women and girls of all ages, with disproportionate negative impacts on women and girls of color.

- COVID-19 Response
- Digital Equity
- Protection Order Streamlining
- Childcare Reform
- Career Pathways
- Maternal and Mental Health

# Solutions & Budget

Investing in the Women's Commission and the women and girls of Washington.

## Recommended Solutions\*

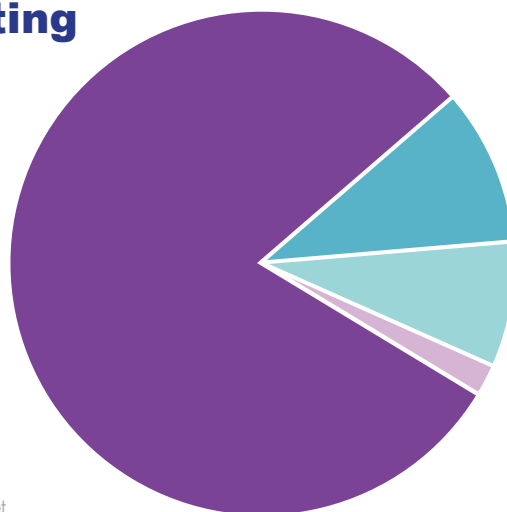
- Invest in prevention-based responses to violence against women.
- Create policies that help women return to the workforce with protections; provide opportunities and innovative infrastructure for success.
- Support workplace policy and initiatives ensuring access to reliable, fast, and affordable broadband across state.
- Ensure workforce training and career pathway opportunities for those displaced by jobs made obsolete by the COVID-19 pandemic and an evolving economy.
- Continue investment in affordable childcare and early education as infrastructure to support a robust economy.
- Strengthen and enforce protections against discrimination, harassment, and retaliation, which disproportionately impact women and people of color.
- Create legislation enabling women to work from home (where reasonably possible) for up to six months after the birth/adoption of an infant/child.
- Fully fund community partners from marginalized communities who provide services within communities – including home visiting.
- Provide additional funding for teacher training and inclusion of cultural considerations as outlined in the Healthy Youth Act.
- Follow and fund recommendations in the 2021 Gender Justice Study.
- Build and sustain strong safety net support systems including investment in affordable housing and shelter.
- Continue support for Governor Inslee's affordable housing and homelessness priorities.
- Continue coordination between state and federal legislators to maximize federal investment in Washington.

\*Additional information regarding the above recommended solutions can be found online at [wswc.wa.gov](https://www.wswc.wa.gov).

## Budgetary Reporting

Total Budget: \$244,055

**80%**  
Staffing\*\*



**10%**

Facilities, IT  
and Legal Services

**8%**

Commissioner and  
Community Outreach  
Travel

**2%**

Supplies, Misc

\*\* The Commission is currently staffed by two and is requesting a 3rd staffer in the next biennium budget.



WASHINGTON STATE  
WOMEN'S COMMISSION

Design by Erica Schreiber.