

Center for American Progress



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The Missing Conversation About Work and Family

Unique Challenges Facing Women of Color

By Jocelyn Frye October 2016

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Introduction and summary

When legendary abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth reportedly asked the question “Ar’n’t I a woman?” at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, she gave voice to the precarious position that many women of color¹ of that era occupied in U.S. society.² Although the exact words of her speech have been debated, the central thesis of her remarks has resonated with piercing clarity for generations. Her landmark speech laid bare the stark reality that, notwithstanding the convention’s focus on advancing women’s rights, women of color often were treated as afterthoughts, distinct from white women because of race and distinct from men because of gender. Truth’s words put front and center her doubly marginalized status as an African American woman, constrained by law and society to live within the racial and gender hierarchy of her era—a hierarchy that determined whether she was expected to work, whether she could make decisions about her family, and whether she had control over her own destiny.

One hundred and sixty-five years later, in a vastly different national landscape, these words still resonate in the public conversation about women, work, and family. The mere utterance of words such as “work-family balance” in today’s story-by-soundbite environment swiftly evokes deeply entrenched assumptions and attitudes about which women are being discussed; which women are valued and deserve attention; and which roles are appropriate for women in the workplace, in their families, and even in society.

Not unlike Sojourner Truth’s critique of the debate of her era, today’s work-family narrative too often communicates a limited vision of who women are, what work is, and what families need. Buzzwords such as “opting out” are used to frame palatable stories about work-family challenges as issues of personal choice, rather than as examples of economic insecurity, inadequate workplace standards, employment barriers, racial and sex discrimination, or the lack of concrete public policy solutions.³ The resulting discussion is at times oversimplistic and underinclusive, lacking a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of women—particularly women of color—and how work-family issues play themselves out differently in different communities every day.

This report examines the unique challenges that many women of color face at work and at home in order to better understand their daily work-family issues. It begins with a historical perspective about the evolution of work-family issues, followed by a discussion of the current challenges facing women of color. It concludes by identifying workable solutions, with the goal of building on individual experiences to help reframe the public narrative more broadly so that policy solutions are responsive to all women and their many diverse needs. Resolving work-family conflicts is an important priority that women of color—and indeed, all women—consistently favor.⁴ It is critical that policymakers take action to pursue effective strategies that can improve the lives of all working families.

Understanding the work-family challenges facing women of color

Developing a clear picture of women’s day-to-day realities, and the work-family implications for women of color in particular, first requires a close examination of the underlying attitudes that have helped shape the national conversation about women, work, and family in the United States. It is important to understand both how these attitudes have evolved over time and how they have varied for different groups of women.

From silos to superwomen: Women, work, and family

Views about women, work, and family are deeply ingrained in the culture of the United States. Many of these attitudes are rooted in the earliest days of the 19th century, when prevailing cultural norms were used to justify socially defined boundaries for women and men—and stepping outside these norms risked provoking controversy or backlash. Many of the mostly male thought leaders and political elites categorized work and family as distinct, disconnected spheres or silos. Within these silos, gender was used as the perceived fault line in order to reinforce stereotypical boundaries that decreed women’s purview as the home and men’s purview as the workplace.⁵

The inherent sexism that fueled this conception of male and female roles helped provide a rationale to deny women—both white women and women of color—economic, educational, and employment opportunities.⁶ But women of color experienced particular complications. Because of biases based not only on their gender but also on their race or ethnicity, many women of color were relegated to second-class status in comparison to their white counterparts.⁷ This meant that women of color—as women, as workers, and as caregivers for their families—often did not fit neatly into society’s work and family silos or perceptions of women’s roles, resulting in fundamentally different experiences, expectations, and opportunities.

Narrow views about who women are

The public narrative about women that often dominates the public debate has been criticized as, either consciously or unconsciously, relying on the experiences of white women as the de facto measure of what women need and want.⁸ Persistent racial and ethnic bias, which has presented itself in myriad different ways over the course of this nation's history, has fueled pernicious stereotypes about women of color that have often led them to be devalued and viewed as not measuring up to the perceived white female ideal.⁹ For example, prevailing views of the 1800s and early 1900s placed white women on a paternalistic pedestal and marginalized women of color.¹⁰ Arguing that women needed special protection and care to be shielded from perceived rigors outside the home, states limited the work and social roles that women could play by passing laws prohibiting women from working long hours or engaging in legal matters or other types of business.¹¹ Left unspoken was the implicit understanding that white women were the only women who should be elevated or protected, while women of color were deemed unworthy of the same respect.¹² Women of color too often were forced into unsafe environments where they had little recourse against abuse and even sexual violence.¹³ Although these notions have long since been rejected by women of color and white women alike as demeaning and disempowering, there still remains an active, robust debate about how well the diverse perspectives of all women, particularly women of color, are included in policy conversations about women and the challenges they face.¹⁴ This debate is relevant to the work-family discussion because it is a reminder that the default assumptions about women that may be reflected in the public debate tend to leave some women out.¹⁵ Developing a broader, more authentic narrative that reflects all women's needs requires intentional efforts to incorporate different perspectives.

Whose work, whose family?

Over the course of the 19th and early 20th century, the societal narrative about work aimed at white women dictated that they were expected to focus solely on home and family—to care for their children and forego working outside the home.¹⁶ Women of color, however, often were constrained by a different set of expectations. Many women of color were expected to fulfill work roles, including jobs as laborers; jobs in the service sector, such as caregiving or domestic work; and jobs in other low-paying industries.¹⁷ Many of these expectations were deeply rooted in the nation's history and laws—in slavery, for example, when African

Americans were bound legally into servitude, as well as during various periods of migration by racial and ethnic minorities who sought to enter the labor force but often were confined to the lowest paying jobs.¹⁸ Early immigrant women of color often initially focused on caring for their families, but eventually had to find work outside the home to make ends meet in an environment that often placed legal limits on the work they could do. Domestic service roles in the 19th century, for example, were filled by African American women in the South, Asian American women—who were primarily Chinese and later Japanese immigrants—and Latinas in the West and Irish immigrant women in the North.¹⁹ Chinese women arriving in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century also worked in family owned or community based businesses in jobs such as seamstresses, laundry workers, and clerical aides, having been legally excluded from working in white-owned businesses.²⁰ Latinas during the same time period worked in a variety of service, domestic, and farm laborer jobs—typically for very low, subsistence wages.²¹ American Indian women, who experienced enormous upheaval throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as tribal communities were displaced and forced to move west, also worked in very low-wage jobs in agriculture, farming, and domestic service in order to support their families.²² While many of these women of color and immigrant women were tasked with caring for others, little thought was given to addressing their own care needs or to acknowledging their work-family challenges.²³ Thus, embedded in the work and family silos were different expectations of the roles that women of color could play—roles that often required them to work to support the societal infrastructure for little or no remuneration and without visibility of the family challenges they faced.

The shift to superwomen and the role of public policy

This historical perspective offers important context for today because it reveals how often women of color were overlooked, forgotten, or positioned outside the popular mainstream narrative. It also shows how the legal and societal infrastructure was used to confine women of color, and indeed all women, to a narrow set of roles. This posture meant that the unique experiences of women of color frequently were left on the margins, and it has present-day ramifications, particularly as the public conversation shifts from preserving individual work and family silos to a more nuanced discussion of how work and family issues overlap. Today, most women juggle multiple roles at home and at work, too often navigating the pressure to become a modern-day “superwoman” who handles every challenge with perfect precision and timing.²⁴ What many contemporary women want and

support are solutions that enable them to address work-family concerns without putting their family or economic stability at risk. Workplace policies have not kept pace with these changing attitudes and needs. This lack of movement has meant that many women, both white women and women of color, do not have the support they need to successfully juggle multiple roles at home and at work. Thus, it is critical to understand how these issues are playing out in women's everyday lives in order to ensure that any new workplace policies are responsive to women's diverse needs and inclusive of their experiences.

Employment and work-family realities of women of color

There is considerable research and data to help illustrate how work-family challenges are playing out in the real world for women of color and increasingly affecting their economic security and stability. Too many women of color end up in jobs with few opportunities for advancement, have growing economic and family caregiving responsibilities, and lack key workplace supports, such as paid leave and child care. Together, these challenges can put added pressures on families as they try to navigate their obligations at work and at home.²⁵

Playing catch-up from the start

Investing in workers by providing good-paying quality jobs that offer a meaningful opportunity for advancement is an essential foundation for most workers to achieve economic security, sustainability, and, eventually, prosperity.²⁶ Jobs that offer a living wage and the ability to move up the ladder are important not only for workers in high-wage professions but also for workers in lower-wage occupations, who often are on more precarious economic footing.²⁷ Although employment prospects have broadened over the past few decades, women of color still confront obstacles that affect their job mobility and stability, particularly when compared to their white counterparts.

For example, researchers have found that African American women and Latinas have less job mobility than their white counterparts. An analysis of 1998–2005 data drawn from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics found that African American women and Latinas were less likely to have moved into certain upper-tier jobs than their white counterparts.²⁸ While 35.6 percent of white women demonstrated mobility into professional or technical jobs, only 18.9 percent of African American women and 24.9 percent of Latinas experienced mobility into these

upper-level jobs.²⁹ Additional research examining women's experiences at the start of their career found that greater job mobility by white women in their first four years out of school put them in a better position to identify more stable and secure jobs in the future when compared to African American women and Latinas.³⁰

Furthermore, African American women and Latinas are less likely to work in higher level, higher paying managerial jobs than white women. These jobs often pay better and offer more opportunities to move up the career ladder. Overall, 44 percent of the white female labor force and 50.2 percent of the Asian American female labor force in 2015 worked in managerial and professional occupations, compared with only 35.2 percent of African American women and 26.6 percent of Latinas.³¹ Even when women of color move into higher level jobs, they often earn less than their white and male counterparts.³²

The result is that many women of color are more likely to be stuck in jobs that do not offer a meaningful opportunity to move up the career ladder or grow their wages, which affects their ability to achieve stability and prosperity for themselves and their families. Indeed, women of color only make up 16 percent of all U.S. workers, but they are nearly one-quarter of U.S. minimum wage workers.³³ Overall, women working full-time year-round earn on average only 80 cents for every \$1 earned by men working full-time year-round.³⁴ This gap is much larger for women of color: African American women earn 63 cents for every \$1 earned by white men, while Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian women earn only 60 cents, Native American women earn 58 cents, and Latinas earn 54 cents.³⁵ Asian American women earn 85 cents for every \$1 earned by white men, but historically that figure has varied widely by subgroup—among Vietnamese women in 2014, for example, they earned only 62 cents.³⁶

In addition to being stuck in place, some women of color also experience more uneven work histories and longer spells of unemployment than white women, which make it even more difficult to build their careers. African American women and Latinas, in particular, encounter difficulty finding employment and experience higher rates of unemployment when compared to their white counterparts. In 2014, 8.9 percent of African American women and 7.1 percent of Latinas were unemployed compared with 4 percent of white women and 3.7 percent of Asian American women; the median duration of unemployment for black women was 14 weeks, while for Latinas it was 10.8 weeks, for Asian American women it was 10.7 weeks, and for white women it was 10 weeks.³⁷

The end result is that many women of color are consistently working in jobs on what is often referred to as the “sticky floor,” because the jobs tend to have higher turnover, limited flexibility, lower pay, and keep many low-income women—disproportionately women of color—in perpetually precarious economic situations.³⁸ The women in these jobs remain less likely to secure positions that offer better wages and more opportunities for career advancement.

Opting out is not an option

Women of color have always played a vital role in the economic security of their families. They are more likely than white women to have sole or primary responsibility for providing economic support to their families. Among mothers, African Americans have the highest percentage of female breadwinners, those who provide at least half of their families’ income. Two-thirds—66.9 percent—of African American mothers and 43.1 percent of Latina mothers provide at least half or more than half of their family’s income, compared with 36.2 percent of white women.³⁹

Furthermore, African American women and Latinas are disproportionately more likely than their white or Asian American counterparts to be single heads of families across different types of family structures. Among African American families in 2015, one-fifth—20.5 percent—of total households were led by a single mother, while 14.3 percent of Hispanic households were led by a single mother. These figures compare with 5.9 percent of non-Hispanic white households and 5.6 percent of Asian American households led by a mother living alone.⁴⁰

These trends mean that many women of color are more likely to face significant economic pressures that affect their ability to provide primary support for their families. At the same time, women of color are less likely to have access to the very supports needed to ease the work-family conflicts that inevitably arise. Workplace policies such as paid family and medical leave, paid or earned sick and safe days—leave that can be used for short-term illnesses or for domestic violence-related reasons—and greater scheduling predictability are critical tools to help workers care for their families without putting their jobs at risk. Women of color who earn low wages are not only least able to afford to take time off from work when an emergency arises, but also have limited access to protections that would enable them to care for their families and return to work without penalty.

Access to paid leave and workplace flexibility

Data from the 2011 American Time Use Survey reveal that certain women of color lack access to important workplace benefits. For example, fewer women of color have access to paid sick days: 58.8 percent of white women workers have access to paid sick days, while 55.6 percent of African American women workers and only 42.3 percent of Latina workers have access.⁴¹ Women of color are less likely to have access to any form of paid leave, although the differences vary—44 percent of Latinas, 40 percent of Asian American women, 37 percent of African American women, and 36 percent of white women do not have access to paid leave.⁴²

A recent Center for American Progress study found a strong correlation between race and ethnicity and access to paid leave and workplace flexibility. When compared with white workers, African American workers were 5.3 percent less likely to have access to flexible work days and 7.2 percent less likely to have access to flexible work hours.⁴³ This gap was even stronger for Latino workers: When compared to white workers, they were 11.5 percent less likely to have access to paid sick days, 12.4 percent less likely to have access to paid vacation days, 6.7 percent less likely to have access to flexible days, and 6.3 percent less likely to have access to flexible work hours.⁴⁴ This uneven access may be in part due to the fact that women of color are overrepresented in low-wage and part-time occupations, where access to paid family leave is lower.⁴⁵ For example, 82 percent of women who are high-wage earners have access to paid sick days, compared with only 14 percent of women who are low-wage earners; 71 percent of women who are high-wage earners have access to paid parental leave, compared with only 10 percent of women who are low-wage earners.⁴⁶

Access to high-quality, affordable child care

Parents across the income spectrum struggle to afford quality child care, which increasingly is becoming out of reach for most working families.⁴⁷ These costs are particularly challenging for the families with the fewest resources, who end up spending a larger percentage of their overall income on child care. Although the data on women of color specifically are limited, they do show that low-income families and families of color—where women of color are more often heads of household—are more likely to contribute an even larger share of their family income to child care compared with all families or white families, respectively, if they are able to afford professional care at all.

Among families who pay for child care, low-income families spend a larger portion of their monthly income on child care, compared with all families. An analysis of 2011 data on weekly child care expenditures found that families below the federal

poverty level with children younger than age 5 spent 36 percent of their monthly income on child care, compared with 9 percent for all families with children younger than age 5.⁴⁸ Similarly, in 2014, the cost of child care constituted a larger percentage of the median income of most families of color when compared to the median income of white families. The average annual cost of center-based care for an infant and a 4-year-old, for example, was 24.1 percent of the median family income of white families compared with 42 percent for African American families, 40.1 percent for Latino families, 41 percent for American Indian and Alaska Native families, 32.1 percent for Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander families, and 21.2 percent for Asian American families.⁴⁹ The lack of affordable, high quality child care options can be even harder for parents frequently moving in and out of the workforce, such as many women of color, who need reliable care when looking for work or when working nonstandard hours.⁵⁰

Access to caregiving supports

Families of color with broader caregiving responsibilities are more likely to have fewer economic resources. Among families where unpaid care is provided to one or more family members, African American and Latino families are more likely than white and Asian American families to have a lower household income. Nearly two-thirds of African American and Latino caregiver households—62 percent and 61 percent, respectively—have a median household income of less than \$50,000, compared with 42 percent of white caregiver households and 30 percent of Asian American caregiver households.⁵¹

What becomes clear is that even though many women of color are working hard to make ends meet, they lack access to key workplace policies that could provide much-needed help.

Not yet in the past: The impact of stereotypes and discrimination

Beyond the statistics that illustrate employment trends and family realities for women of color are a host of intangible factors that influence the perception and understanding of their work-family issues. The competing demands of work and family do not occur in a vacuum; rather, as already noted, they take place in the broader context of individual and collective views of women and their roles, family responsibilities, and workplace culture. Particularly relevant to the conversation is recognizing how the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity plays out in

the real world—in different workplace settings; in the context of shifting, sometimes ambivalent views of women and work; and in the perceptions of caregiving and caregivers and the willingness to accommodate both in the workplace.

Women of color sit at a unique intersection, where the combination of gender, race, and ethnicity have led to a distinct set of experiences and attitudes directed at them that are different from those of white women and men of color. Stereotypes about African American, Latina, Native American, and Asian American women, even if widely discredited today, still persist and influence the opportunities they receive and the experiences they have.⁵² Regardless of income, negative perceptions of families of color can limit their options to ensure their families have the care they need.⁵³

Contemporary researchers have noted that both white women and women of color continue to be constrained by narrow—but sometimes different—views of what are considered their proper roles.⁵⁴ Some researchers argue that working white women with children sometimes are questioned about whether they can be both good mothers and good workers, but many women of color with children are expected to go to work and are questioned if they want to stay home.⁵⁵ Perhaps stemming from the historical view of family matters being confined to the home, some women of color may find that their success at work hinges—and is judged—on their willingness to deprioritize family in favor of work obligations.

All of these attitudes likely influence the contemporary national discussion about women of color and the proper role of public policy in accommodating family needs in the workplace. The effects of old attitudes and competing expectations may still linger beneath the surface, affecting women's workplace experiences and opportunities. While it is clear that not every woman confronts these attitudes, policymakers should be aware of potential differences in how women of color are perceived when attempting to solve work-family conflicts.

Furthermore, while there are many cultural attitudes that influence the experiences of women of color in the workplace, it is important to determine when attitudes and stereotypes evolve into something more harmful or even discriminatory. Measuring to what extent discrimination is a factor in workplace decisions is always difficult, but data may provide some insight into the role of discrimination in the broader discussion about accommodating work-family needs in the workplace.⁵⁶

For example, the data on pregnancy discrimination charges are particularly revealing with regards to whether women of color face resistance to accommodating certain caregiving needs. A study of pregnancy discrimination claims filed from FY 1997 to FY 2007 found that much of the growth in claims was due to an increase in charges filed by women of color.⁵⁷ More recently, data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or EEOC, show that charges are most likely to be filed in low-wage industries, where women of color often work.⁵⁸ Pregnancy discrimination is an area that squarely confronts workplace attitudes toward caregiving. Over the 20-year period between FY 1992 and FY 2011, there was a 60 percent increase in pregnancy discrimination charges filed with the EEOC.⁵⁹ This rise prompted the EEOC to pursue stepped-up litigation and enforcement strategies, and there has been an 11 percent drop in charges over the past five years.⁶⁰

Refining the work-family narrative to include the diverse experiences of women of color

Research provides important insight into the work-family challenges that many women of color confront. Even more critical, however, is finding solutions to these challenges—and that work begins with defining, refreshing, and refining a work-family narrative that is broad enough to encompass the diverse experiences of all women.

Key principles for a new narrative

Four key principles are essential to framing a more inclusive work-family conversation focused on policy solutions that respond to all women's needs.

Work-family policies are essentials, not options

Framing work-family policies in the public discourse as optional practices or as nice perks effectively ignores the economic realities of most families, particularly those of women of color. Because many women of color have greater responsibility for the economic security of their families yet have fewer resources than both their male and white counterparts, they often face greater financial pressures when a caregiving emergency arises, as well as have a greater need for policy solutions that provide essential economic support.

Furthermore, it is critical to institute policies that help promote stronger workforce attachment and ensure that women are better positioned to move into the workforce to find steady, reliable economic support for themselves and their families. To be effective and reflect the needs of women on the ground, work-family solutions should be framed more broadly as structural, baseline economic measures—or core labor standards in the work context—that are essential to successful workplaces and workers, rather than as optional benefits reserved for a privileged few.

Racial and ethnic differences in women's experiences are central to the analysis

Women of color bring unique perspectives to the table because their experiences reflect the intersectional nature of the lives they lead through multiple prisms of gender, race, and ethnicity.⁶¹ Considerable data reveal disparities along racial and ethnic lines in women's employment rates, wages, economic responsibilities within families, and more. Although the reasons for these disparities vary and are at times difficult to measure, the fact that they exist can be important when trying to isolate problems and identify responsive solutions.

For example, if women of color are more likely to be single heads of household than their white counterparts, then they may be less likely to benefit from policy proposals that only provide for unpaid time off in cases of family emergencies because they cannot afford to go without pay. Or, if women of color still face biased attitudes at work that deprioritize the importance of their roles as mothers, then relying on voluntary measures to provide flexibility for caregiving may be a less reliable or realistic alternative to secure care for their families. Thus, it is critical to be aware of these differences and assess what roles they may play in policy discussions and proposed solutions. Furthermore, it is important to identify policy solutions that can provide a uniform baseline and discourage policymakers from making decisions based on subjective whims and preferences.

Work-family issues do not happen in a vacuum

The data make clear that women of color often juggle many different needs at once: They need to generate enough income to keep their families stable; they need steady employment and better ways to reenter the workforce quickly; they need safe, affordable, high-quality child care; they need access to services to maintain their health and overall well-being; and more. Too often the public discussion about work-family policy occurs in isolation, focusing on one issue without fuller consideration of the bigger picture. Equal pay, access to affordable child care, paid leave, health care, and many other issues are interconnected; they are all issues that have enormous implications for women's ability to go to work and achieve economic stability. Women of color strongly support such policy interventions, but they are keenly aware that these issues are part of a broader set of challenges that must be understood in context.⁶² Community-centered approaches that

acknowledge the relationships between economic security; employment options; access to high-quality health care services, including reproductive care; educational opportunities; and safety concerns, such as domestic violence and criminal justice, are particularly important.⁶³

Strong work-family policies are critical to achieve women's equality and equal employment opportunity

Women's equality is inextricably linked to women's ability to participate fully in the workplace. As already noted, women of color are more likely to work in jobs that lack the very policies necessary to address work-family demands, which can impact their labor force participation, job tenure, and overall workplace success. Strong work-family policies help ensure that women are not denied opportunities or unfairly penalized because of their family obligations.⁶⁴ Such policies are a particularly important tool for creating a level playing field in the workplace and removing barriers to opportunity.

Policy recommendations

An inclusive work-family policy agenda should embrace strategies that recognize and respond to all women's diverse experiences and needs. It should include strategies that elevate the unique experiences of women of color as a central part of—and not simply an add-on to—the policy conversation about how to ensure that women succeed in the workplace and provide support for their families. The following are key strategies that could help make a concrete difference in women's lives.

Establish a new normal to improve job quality

Too many women of color are stuck in jobs that do not pay enough to sustain a family and prosper. Taking steps to improve the overall quality of jobs could help raise the floor not only for women of color but also for all workers, and could make clear the baseline standards essential for any workplace. Such measures would be particularly useful for workers in low-wage jobs because these jobs typically offer the fewest benefits. These measures could include:

- **Basic labor standards.** Establishing a baseline package of benefits for all workers would help them fulfill their work and family obligations without jeopardizing their economic stability. Such standards could include earned sick and safe days, paid family and medical leave, workplace flexibility, and emergency leave for child and elder care.
- **Right to request.** Establishing a right to request flexible work arrangements would ensure that both women and men have the opportunity to ask for work arrangements that meet their needs and those of their families.
- **Scheduling predictability.** Establishing greater work schedule predictability would ensure that workers were better able to plan their work and family schedules to help minimize last-minute disruptions or costs, such as unexpected emergency child care expenses.

- **Skills building and access to training.** Incentivizing and rewarding employers who provide more opportunities for skills building and job or managerial training—including cultural competency training to reduce potential workplace bias—would expand women’s advancement opportunities.

All of these measures would provide greater protections to ensure that women working in jobs up and down the pay scale can take time off to address their families’ care needs without putting their jobs and livelihoods at risk.

Raise wages and ensure fair pay practices

Key to improving the economic security and stability of women of color and their families is pursuing concrete short- and long-term strategies to grow their wages. Such measures should include:

- **Raising the minimum wage.** Increasing the minimum wage would provide the lowest-wage workers, who are disproportionately women of color, a greater ability to achieve economic stability. The current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour is not enough to lift families out of poverty. Raising the minimum wage to at least \$12 per hour would help provide women of color with much-needed family income.⁶⁵ In addition, changing the rule that permits tipped workers to be paid a lower minimum wage is also critical. The federal minimum wage for workers who typically receive tips in their earnings—frequently called the tipped minimum cash wage—is a breathtakingly low \$2.13 per hour. Eliminating the tipped minimum wage so that these workers are paid equally to other workers who earn the standard federal minimum wage is essential to improving their economic viability and sustainability.⁶⁶ Efforts to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour at the local level also can play a key role in lifting families to achieve greater economic security. Complementary strategies, such as expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-wage workers, can boost wages as well.
- **Combating pay discrimination.** It is vital to undertake a robust, comprehensive initiative to eliminate pay discrimination, begin shrinking the pay gap experienced by women of color, and improve employer pay practices overall. Such an initiative would benefit all workers. For example, requiring greater pay transparency would minimize secretive practices that can be used to shield discrimination. This could be done by prohibiting rules that require pay secrecy, except where confidentiality is required in official job duties; protecting employees

against retaliation when they discuss their pay with coworkers; requiring disclosure of starting salaries or salary ranges for entry-level or other designated jobs; and developing guidance for employers to use when negotiating salaries to help minimize wide pay disparities for the same job, while still providing flexibility to secure high-demand applicants.

Furthermore, promoting greater accountability by requiring employers to disclose pay data to enforcement officials on a regular basis is critical to ensure compliance with the law and help target enforcement efforts where they are needed the most. Regular analysis of equal employment data by occupation and industry also should be used in order to identify significant racial, ethnic, and gender gaps and undertake in-depth analyses of what could be driving them.

It also is essential to strengthen existing legal protections so that all employees are better positioned to challenge discriminatory pay practices. These protections include limiting employers' use of salary history or prior salary in determining job applicants' starting salaries, requiring employers to demonstrate a business necessity for pay disparities, and making clear that equal pay for equal work does not mean that jobs have to be exactly the same in order to be considered equal in terms of skill, effort, responsibility, and working conditions.

- **Foster collective organizing and union participation.** A strategy to raise wages should also include removing barriers to collective organizing and participation in unions. Women represented by unions consistently earn higher wages, with Latinas and African American women in unions recording median weekly earnings that are 42 percent and 34 percent higher respectively than their non-union counterparts.⁶⁷

Promote workplace equality and dismantle bias

Despite progress, many women of color continue to encounter stereotypes and biases that limit their job opportunities and overall workplace success. Some of these barriers can have a disproportionate effect on their ability to fulfill their work obligations and respond to the needs of their families. Rather than ignore the fact that such biases still exist, it is critical to confront them head on with specific strategies:

- **Vigorous civil rights enforcement.** Stepped-up enforcement of civil rights laws and antidiscrimination protections should focus particularly on rooting out discrimination aimed at women of color. This can be done through trainings on

issues such as uncovering implicit bias, and targeting specific occupations and industries. Undertaking new efforts to identify and develop guidance on the most effective strategies for investigating and resolving intersectional, such as race and gender, claims is also crucial to providing a stronger legal foundation for remedying discriminatory workplace practices. Special attention on lower wage, sticky floor jobs, which often have higher rates of discrimination charge filings, is also needed to examine disparities in promotion rates more closely and explore best practices for improving opportunities.

- **Disaggregated data broken down by race, ethnicity, and gender.** Ensuring enforcement resources for regular review of all equal employment enforcement data broken down by race, ethnicity, and gender can help maximize enforcement efforts to isolate particular types of claims, jobs, or industries where women of color encounter problems. Making aggregate data publicly available also would provide greater transparency and insight into workplace disparities.
- **Protection against family responsibilities discrimination.** Exploring ways to step up efforts to combat discrimination based on family responsibilities is critical, including conducting research on existing gaps in the law and the potential benefits of creating stronger, more uniform protections against discrimination based on caregiving status.
- **Promotion of voluntary employer compliance with the law.** Employers should be encouraged to undertake internal assessments to identify disparities in wages and retention and promotion rates; create performance measures for staff, particularly supervisors, to evaluate efforts to eliminate bias; and explore ways to promote economic mobility through nontraditional job training and apprenticeships, which often offer better options for career advancement for many women.

Creating care-centered communities to address work-family needs

It is critical to create workplace and community environments that embrace as a core value the importance of ensuring that families have access to the care they need at all stages of life. This means ensuring that parents have access to child care and that adults are able to care for their aging or ill parents and for themselves. These supports should include:

- **Access to affordable, high-quality child care.** Workers cannot be successful if they are worried about their children’s safety and well-being; therefore, greater access to high-quality, affordable child care programs is essential, particularly for low-wage workers. Furthermore, it is critical to pursue programs that offer access to child care during nontraditional hours or provide emergency care—either for workers or job seekers—when regular child care falls through.
- **Access to universal pre-K.** Expanding the availability of universal pre-K programs would help children gain critical early learning educational benefits, and help women and men ensure that their children are well positioned for healthy, productive futures.
- **Support for caregivers.** Exploring ways to provide greater assistance to caregivers, such as through caregiver stipends that would provide financial support to those who are providing care in lieu of other employment, would create a vital economic safety net for many women.
- **Community assessments.** Developing a community assessment tool would allow policymakers and stakeholders to evaluate the real needs of local communities and respond to work-family concerns. Local leaders could work with leading companies or with grants from the Department of Labor to develop an assessment tool that looks at a number of factors to assess a community’s responsiveness to its residents’ care needs. Such factors could include availability of public transportation, access to health care, and the number of quality child care providers.

Encourage businesses to lead by example

Employers do not have to wait for government action to voluntarily take steps to improve job quality and make their workplaces stronger. Adopting voluntary measures to improve policies and better enable workers to respond to family or medical emergencies may offer the dual benefit of improving job quality while also helping reduce turnover and foster greater productivity. There are also steps employers can take to assess whether their workplaces are inclusive, and to invest in training for employees so that they can recognize and respond to biases in the workplace.

Issues on the horizon

This report identifies some of the key issues affecting the ability of many women of color to respond to the dual demands of work and family. But there are many other issues worth future exploration that are of particular relevance to women of color and can affect their economic stability, including:

- The effects of access to high-quality educational opportunities on future earnings and work-family options for women of color
- The combined effects of gender, racial, and ethnic pay disparities
- The connection between overall economic security and the availability of and access to comprehensive, high-quality health care services, including reproductive health care
- The impact of interactions with the criminal justice system on employment opportunities

Examining these issues can help provide greater understanding of potential policy improvements and additional strategies that could be used to strengthen outcomes for women of color and their families.

Conclusion

For many women of color, grappling with the multiple demands of work and family is a daily struggle. Too often, however, the public discourse does not discuss their experiences in depth through the unique lenses of race, ethnicity, and gender. This means that their work-family challenges often are not solved or even addressed.

Women of color play a central role in providing economic support to their families, yet they are more likely to have lower earnings, less job mobility, and less access to strong workplace work-family policies than their white counterparts. All of these obstacles can and do affect their ability to provide much-needed resources for their families. Acknowledging the experiences of women of color can provide a fuller, more nuanced understanding of how work-family issues play themselves out in a variety of communities. The narrative used to discuss work-family challenges, therefore, must be broad enough to encompass the diverse experiences of all families. Utilizing a more accurate narrative will help prioritize the solutions needed to respond to the problems that women and their families face. Public policy solutions such as greater access to paid leave and increased wages could make a real difference in women's lives. These are priorities that women care about, and on which policymakers should take action, not because it's a nice thing to do but because action is sorely needed to strengthen all families.

About the author

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Endnotes

- 1 Throughout this report, the term “women of color” is used to refer collectively to African American, Hispanic, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, and American Indian or Native American women, including those who may identify with more than one of these categories. The author recognizes that the term is imperfect. For example, although the term includes the phrase “of color,” it is intended here to be broad enough to encompass multiethnic and multiracial women who identify themselves as white and an additional racial or ethnic category, such as women who identify their race as white and their ethnic origin as Hispanic. Another limitation is that the same data are not available for every racial and ethnic group. Thus, data on “women of color” may not include specific data on women from certain racial or ethnic groups, such as women of American Indian descent. The purpose of using the term, even with its imperfections, however, is to bring under one umbrella all women who fall outside of the white, non-Hispanic U.S. population because such lines have been used historically to determine status in American society and access to opportunities.
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Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

