Making the Case for Affirmative Action: Women of Color in Corporate America
Affirmative action is a remedy for past and present discrimination which extends our Nation’s promise of equal opportunity to women and men of color and to white women. Some affirmative action opponents argue that these programs have fulfilled their mission and others mischaracterize affirmative action as a system that mandates quotas and unfairly penalizes white men.

In recent years, the battle over affirmative action has expanded from the realm of federal policy to voters, policy makers and the courts at the state and local levels. California, Oregon, Texas, and Florida have halted affirmative action initiatives in the public sector -- in employment, education, and government contracting opportunities. On the other hand, citizens in Houston, Texas voted to keep affirmative action in place in their city’s contracting program.

Like the voters in Houston, the Center for Women Policy Studies believes that discrimination persists and that strong affirmative action programs continue to be needed – both to prevent a return to widespread exclusionary practices and to fulfill the promise of equal opportunity for women and men of color and white women.

The Center’s research into the workplace experiences of women of color supports this policy position. The Center’s survey of 1,562 women of color (African American, Asian American, Native American and Latina) in 16 Fortune 1000 companies found that many women believe that their opportunities for career advancement are limited because of their race/ethnicity and or gender.
The survey’s results, reported in *No More “Business As Usual”: Women of Color in Corporate America – Report of the National Women of Color Work/Life Survey* (1999), demonstrate that the current workplace is not the colorblind or gender-neutral place that critics of affirmative action claim it is. In fact, a majority of women of color on every rung of the corporate ladder report that they hear sexist and sexual jokes (61 percent) and racial and ethnic jokes (53 percent) at work (See Chart 1). Fully, 80 percent of Native American women and 60 percent of African American women have heard racial and ethnic jokes at work, as have half of Latinas (50 percent) and Asian American women (49 percent). Similarly, 75 percent of Native American women and 69 percent of African American women have heard sexual and sexist jokes at work, as have 53 percent of Asian American women and 56 percent of Latinas.
In such a workplace climate, it is not surprising that one of five women of color (21 percent) do not feel that they are free to “be themselves” at work. Indeed, more than one third of women of color — ranging from 28 percent to 44 percent — believe that they must “play down” their race or ethnicity to succeed and more than one quarter — ranging from 24 percent to 40 percent — believe that they must play down their gender to succeed (Charts 2 and 3). Finally, nearly a quarter of women of color (22 percent) report they must play down both their race/ethnicity and their gender at work.

Women of color also report that they face unequal treatment and unequal opportunity for promotions, that their company’s leaders lag in their commitment to implementing diversity policies, and that discrimination remains pervasive in their workplaces:
• Two in five women of color (42 percent) believe that they are not afforded equal opportunities for promotion as compared to their colleagues with similar qualifications. Half of African American (50 percent) and nearly half of Native American women (47 percent) and one third of Latinas and Asian American women report this unequal treatment (See Chart 4).

• Nearly half of women of color (44 percent) believe that their companies are led by executives whose actions are inconsistent with their statements of support for diversity. African American women (52 percent) and Native American women (49 percent) are most likely to share this opinion of their corporate leaders, as are 38 percent of Latinas and 33 percent of Asian American women.

For more information on affirmative action, contact the following organizations:

Americans for a Fair Chance  
1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 510  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-822-9221  
Fax: 202-822-9267  
www.fairchance.org  
info@fairchance.org

Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights  
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Phone: 202-659-5565  
www.cccr.org

Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law  
1401 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20005-0400  
Phone: 202-662-8600  
Fax: 202-783-0857  
www.lawyerscomm.org

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights  
1629 K Street, NW, Suite 1010  
Washington, DC 20006  
Phone: 202-466-3311  
Fax: 202-466-3435  
www.civilrights.org

MANA: A National Latina Organization  
1725 K Street, N.W., Suite 501  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
Phone: (202) 833-0060  
www.hermana.org

Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund  
634 South Spring Street, 11th Floor  
Los Angeles, CA. 90014  
Phone: (213) 629-2512  
Fax: (213) 629-0266  
www.maldef.org

National Asian and Pacific American Legal Consortium  
1140 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 1200  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Phone: 202-296-2300  
Fax: 202-296-2300  
www.napalc.org

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund  
99 Hudson Street, 16th Floor  
New York, NY 10013  
212-965-2200

National Partnership for Women and Families  
1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 710  
Washington, DC 20009  
Phone: 202-986-2600  
Fax: 202-986-2539  
www.nationalpartnership.org

National Women’s Law Center  
11 Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 1400  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Phone: 202-588-5180  
Fax: 202-588-5185  
www.nwlc.org

NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund  
395 Hudson Street, 5th Floor  
New York, NY 10014  
Phone: 212-925-6635  
Fax: 212-226-1066  
www.nowldef.org