NEW FRONTIERS FOR WORKER-FRIENDLY COMPANIES

Report of
The Corporate Symposium on
Linking Work/Family
and Workplace Diversity

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Since 1991, the Center for Women Policy Studies has been conducting original, policy-relevant research on how working women of color define and experience work and family and workplace diversity issues. The Center initiated its research to bring the self-defined needs of women of color (African American, Latina, Asian American and Native American) to the attention of employers, policymakers and feminist advocates.

We believe that this is an especially important undertaking now, as employers consider how to help women and men “balance” their work and family responsibilities. Our work is designed to fill a significant gap in the research by studying how women of color experience these issues. We believe that this research is invaluable to employers, as women of color are expected to account for an ever-increasing percentage of new entrants in the Nation’s workforce.

The Center began this research with a series of six focus groups, followed by a second set of 10 focus groups, with middle-income working women of color; the research was completed in 1994 (Tucker, Wolfe, and Virtuell, 1995; Tucker and Wolfe, 1994). Although the initial research explored how women of color define and experience work and family issues, their responses led us to a broader study of how workplace cultures affect both women’s careers and their personal lives. In this second phase of the research, we considered issues such as child care, flex time, family and medical leave, mentoring, networking, advancement, and stress management at work and at home.

To bring our research findings to our colleagues in corporate America, and to serve as a catalyst for discussion of their policies and programs, the Center convened a Corporate Symposium on Linking Work/Family and Workplace Diversity on December 5, 1995 in New York. This Report summarizes both the Center’s research and the Symposium discussion. We present it to our readers with the hope that it will inspire employers to consider new strategies to respond to the needs expressed.

Leslie R. Wolfe
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June 1996
Introduction

The Center's research findings reveal that women of color often must navigate hostility and discrimination in their workplaces. These realities have profound implications for corporations as they seek to improve employee productivity, enhance revenue and remain competitive in the rapidly changing global economy. The Center’s findings also have important ramifications for the health and well-being of women of color.

Women of color report that they cannot separate themselves to define their experiences in the workplace as the result of their race/ethnicity or their gender. While their treatment as “persons of color” is considered a “workplace diversity issue,” their day to day struggles to balance work and family responsibilities are considered a “work and family,” or women’s issue. But this compartmentalizing does not fit the work lives of working women of color. For example, focus group participants spoke often of requesting time off for family reasons, such as to participate in a child’s extracurricular activity, and of being treated differently by their supervisors than their white women colleagues.

Clearly, what begins as an issue of “balancing work and family responsibilities” crosses the line to become an issue of differential treatment by race/ethnicity — a “workplace diversity concern” as well.

Most employers traditionally have addressed racism and sexism through a variety of diversity and affirmative action policies and programs. Many companies also have instituted a separate track of programs to help employees better balance their work and family responsibilities by providing such services as dependent care assistance, family and medical leave and flexible work schedules. Although some companies now link these two sets of programs and policies, the Center’s research demonstrates that working women of color feel that their efforts to cope with on-the-job racism and sexism and to balance work and family responsibilities are inextricably linked.
Hostile Workplaces, Overwhelming Stress

While some women describe their workplaces as positive, flexible environments where employees are valued and respected, the majority of the women in the Center’s focus groups do not. Instead, they described their workplaces as ruthless, domineering, dishonest and aggressive — plagued by distrust, disrespect, low morale, sabotage, racism and sexism.

My company is like “a culture,” said a Latina from Chicago. “People will stab you in the back.”

“At my company, they just want to get the product out of the door at all costs,” said an African American woman from Chicago. “They are just charging ahead, whether you work a 60-plus hour week or come into work at 7 o’clock in the morning and stay until 12 midnight. They are insensitive to personal issues or anything else that might be going on,” she said.

Women report that hostile working environments create a level of stress far beyond the normal demands of their jobs. As a Latina from San Francisco put it, “just literally, the stress is overwhelming.”

Some women commented positively about their workplaces and when they did, they described workplaces that were flexible, that valued workers and their contributions above all, and respected their personal needs. The animals they selected as images of their companies portrayed these positive qualities:

“A dog, because dogs are friendly. At my work, I can come anytime I want as long as I do my job,” said an Asian American woman in San Francisco. A Latina in Chicago described her company as “a bear because of the strength of the company; it is well established. And a dolphin because I view dolphins as helping people.” In San Francisco, an Asian American woman described her workplace as a bird because “a bird is really free, it can fly anywhere it wants. Nobody can control its life.” In Chicago, a Latina saw a horse as the animal most like her workplace because “horses are strong and big, but free.”
Coping Strategies

Many women respond to troublesome workplace environments by devising what the Center calls “burnout avoidance strategies” — self-protective methods of escape from the hostile workplace. When the pressure boils over, women either “check out” mentally, leave their workspace for a break, or begin to search for other jobs. Whatever self-protective strategy women devise, their productivity suffers.

“I go to the cafeteria,” said an Asian American woman in San Francisco. “That gets me away from my desk for a while because the cafeteria is in the other building. And that gives me time to walk, think and calm myself down.”

For many women, workplace problems and stress spill over into their personal lives. Many call upon spouses, children, parents and friends to help them unwind from work; others turn to their health club or to spiritual or religious sources for comfort.

Still others use the same “burnout avoidance strategies” to make the transition from work to home at the end of the day. With little personal time at home, women often create time by “checking out” when they arrive home.

“I just try to go to my room and I tell my husband, ‘just please leave me alone,’” said a Native American woman from San Francisco. “‘Just let me cool down.’”

“I tell my son, ‘I need 10 minutes — don’t knock on my door,’” said a Latina from San Francisco.

Networking and Mentoring

While many women believe that networking is essential for advancement, they also feel that they benefit little from it. Instead, they tend to see it as a strategy to avoid exclusion rather than to build alliances.
“You have to network, you have to go to that party because if you don't, you're not a team player and that's an excuse to kick you out or not to include you in everything,” a Latina from San Francisco noted.

For the most part, women report that they do not network with colleagues at work and that networking in social settings holds even less appeal.

Some women express concern about the scarce number of women of color in positions to be mentors, while others shy away from men as mentors for fear of sexual harassment.

**A Desire To Be Promoted On Merit**

Some women associate moving up the corporate ladder with increased stress and less time with their families rather than with increased opportunities for growth, more flexibility and more money to help with family responsibilities. Thus, they may decide not to seek or accept new challenges and promotions, despite their ambitions and desire to advance.

But most women hope that their skills, experience and performance will be rewarded with promotions and higher salaries. All too often, however, women of color report that they lose promotions to people who are less qualified — most often white men and, sometimes, men of color or white women.

An African American woman from Chicago described how she was passed over for promotions that went to a white woman, then an African American man and a white man. “They would always come to me for help,” she said. “I was humiliated because I knew I should have had that job.”

Despite these experiences, women of color strongly believe that the deciding factors for advancement should be hard work, experience and merit rather than race or sex-based “preferences.”
A Desire for Change

Co-sponsored by the Center, the AT&T Foundation and the Ford Foundation, and hosted by The Equitable in New York City, the Corporate Symposium on Linking Work/Family and Workplace Diversity brought together representatives from 16 companies. The Center's presentation of its research findings provoked thoughtful discussion about diversity and work/family issues and changing workplace cultures.

“We all have our own anxieties and stresses in work and life. But if you add to it the daily dose of frustration and anger and hurt that women of color face from comments and treatment that can only be called racist and/or sexist — including harassment — then you can understand the level of stress that women simply cannot leave at the door of the office,” said Leslie R. Wolfe, President of the Center for Women Policy Studies. “I hope we can spend some time thinking about ways to nurture women in the workplace to move them toward advancement, promotion and effectiveness. And this will require us to transform our corporate cultures to truly value people who value both their work lives and their personal lives,” she added.

Carol Kleiman, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune who writes about workplace issues, presented data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that underscore the critical need for corporations to respond to the needs of a rapidly changing work force. By the year 2000, white men will make up only 45 percent of the total work force and only 15 percent of net new entrants. Women, men of color, and new immigrants will account for 80 percent of labor force growth and women will make up 47 percent of the workforce, hired for 64 percent of all new jobs. Tomorrow’s workforce will include 3.7 million more African Americans, six million more Latinos and 2.4 million more Asian Americans than are in the workforce today.

Kleiman noted these statistics to show why companies must respond to the changing demographics of the workforce and to their employees’ often demanding work and family responsibilities to remain competitive. “The idea that it’s okay to have family responsibilities and a job, too, has to become part of the corporate culture,” Kleiman said.
Employers will have to become more flexible about work hours, job sharing, child care, elder care, career paths, and people dropping in and out of the workforce, she said. They must institute flex time, allow more employees to work from home, permit job sharing and part-time work, encourage mentoring programs for women, expand job training, establish child care centers and referral services, provide assistance with elder care and promote diversity.

Several participants reported that a growing number of senior executives are becoming concerned about retaining women and men of color and are creating programs in response.

“When we started our diversity program,” said Symposium panelist Francine Riley, Practice Leader for Organization Effectiveness at GTE, “we listened very carefully to what the CEO was saying. He was saying, ‘I want GTE to be considered as a world-class company. I want every employee to be fully respected.’”

Another participant reported that “our CEO said to me just a few weeks ago, ‘My daughter quit her job. She has two kids . . . . She is so guilty about it. . . . I just feel her pain. But she just couldn’t deal with the pressure of the job and the two kids.’” She noted that she told her CEO that there is a way that we can create a workplace that can prevent this from happening, so that people do not need to choose between their work and their families “to keep their sanity.” This CEO, she told us, is “not unique. This is happening in a lot of places all over the country.”

Francine Riley reported that it is happening at GTE; she said that the president of one of GTE’s largest companies undertook his own in-house research in an effort to understand diversity issues. “We have a problem. We don’t have women here. We don’t have minorities here,” he said. And we said, ‘Well, maybe senior management doesn’t understand’,” according to Riley. “He said, ‘They don’t have to understand. They have eyes. They can see there’s something wrong.’ He personally went around and gathered focus groups of people of color and white women to talk about what they thought the barriers were and sent a report to the office of the chairman,” she said.

Other participants spoke about the enormous challenges facing managers whose senior executives might be reluctant to change the corporate culture, perhaps for competitive reasons.
Economist and syndicated columnist Julianne Malveaux framed the issue this way: “There is no incentive for a company to be good. The only incentive is the notion that you know it’s good. But knowing is not going to trade on the stock market. And this is the problem. So companies that want to do good work are frequently stymied by the fact that they know that their competitor in exactly the same business isn’t going to do it.”

“Somehow there’s got to be some nexus between leadership, corporate leadership and public policy” that promotes diversity and work/family programs in the workplace, she added. Malveaux also noted that, “as I talk about minority development programs, 185 of the Fortune 500 companies have established them voluntarily. That means that there are 315 who... simply do not have them.”

“Sometimes in my heart of hearts, I am not convinced that corporations are convinced that women are here to stay and are taken seriously as employees,” said Vicky Banach, Manager of Work/Family Issues at AT&T and a Symposium panelist.

A Look at Corporate Programs

Five senior managers appearing on a panel spoke to Symposium participants about work/family and diversity practices at their companies.

Eugene Andrews, Manager of Workforce Diversity at General Electric Corporation, noted that GE has 12 major businesses and 220,000 employees worldwide and that the company views diversity as “a process of cultural change” that integrates work/family and diversity programs.

The company’s diversity work stems from a study of nine U.S. companies, he reported. From that study, the company decided that its diversity program must include nine key components:

- commitment from top management;
- an integrated diversity strategy;
- aggressive recruitment of women and people of color;
- education and training;
career development;
programs to balance work and family responsibilities;
a communications plan;
awards and recognition; and,
community outreach.

"The companies that had some progress in the area of diversity also paid attention to the whole issue of balancing work/family, not necessarily as part of the diversity effort, but it was there," Andrews noted.

"In spite of the rhetoric around the equality of men and women, women are still the primary care providers of children," he added. "And if women are truly to be within this inclusive concept of diversity and really have a shot, we need to tend to the needs of women who are still the primary care providers."

"It does not mean that we ignore what it means to be a single male parent and that men, in fact, do have concerns around balancing work and family. They certainly do." Andrews also reported that "I do more white male focus group studies than any others because that's the group that really has the power. And if they're not included, I don't find any real change happening," he added.

Andrews described one occasion in which diversity training for senior managers at GE's major appliance business incorporated similar training for their spouses. "The result was a continuation of discussion between spouses beyond that which took place at the training session," Andrews said.

At AT&T, Vicky Banach reported, programs to help working parents are included in the company's benefits package, which is negotiated with its two major unions.

These programs stemmed from the recognition of "the diversity of family needs that people have," she said. In addition to providing child care assistance, the company has programs for elder care, education and adoption, community investment for dependent care and a number of flexible work arrangements.
Danach said that AT&T knows that, to retain talented employees, it must respond to the needs of women with such programs as well as with formal opportunities for advancement. Moreover, she said, her company must address the particular needs of women of color and recognize the needs of employees who are also caregivers.

JoeAnn McPherson, a District Manager at AT&T, discussed the company's Diversity Quality Council of senior managers, vice presidents and employee resource group leaders who help develop diversity strategies. The company's diversity programs are based on a foundation of awareness and understanding, community involvement, minority and women's business enterprises, and recruitment of women and men of color. She also reported that AT&T regularly asks employees about diversity issues through an employee opinion survey.

Donna Klein, Director of Work-Life Programs at Marriott International Inc., spoke about the challenges of managing diversity and work/family issues at a company of 185,000 employees who speak 26 languages, 80 percent of whom are hourly low-wage workers and 50 percent of whom are women.

"Burnout is an every day life existence for our employees," Klein said. "So, interestingly enough, you hear many fewer complaints about it because it is a way of life. . . . Although there is a desire that life be easier, there isn't much of an expectation."

Marriott's work/family programs offer resource referral, parenting education and a child development center. But Klein reported that the company realized that it was not adequately addressing the particular needs of low-wage employees and began several experimental programs in response. These include the creation of a consortium with Marriott competitors in Atlanta to establish a full-service center for 1,000 employees. The center will include a 24-hour, seven-day a week child care center for 250 children and also will provide child immunizations, nutrition counseling, parenting education, and referrals.

Marriott also established a toll-free telephone number, staffed by social workers, for employees to learn about work/family programs and to get help with everything from domestic violence to transportation problems; the company also has a separate network of social workers.
According to Klein, 10 percent of employees have used the phone service, which is available in 20 languages. Finally, Marriott recently established a council of low-wage workers and their families to explore work/family issues and Marriott programs to address them.

GTE, a multinational telecommunications company with more than 120,000 employees, conducted a company-wide audit and focus groups before comprehensively addressing diversity issues, according to Symposium panelist Francine Riley.

GTE's focus groups with African American men and women uncovered feelings about stereotyping and prejudice within the workplace, she said, that are similar to the Center's focus group findings.

The company also created work/family programs to help employees juggle the demands of home and work and cope better with stress. The School's Out program, for example, provides a safe environment for employees' children on days when schools are closed. The program provides children with computers, arts and crafts, and gym facilities. "It really takes a tremendous burden off the parents, who are at their wit's end about what to do with the children," said Riley.

GTE also offers a college planning seminar for children of employees who are high school juniors and seniors "because nobody has time any more to think through how they're going to get their kids into college, which all kids are going to need to do if they're going to be able to function in the workforce," she stated.

GTE plans to hold seminars on career planning which will include a focus on barriers to recruitment and advancement of women, and on financial planning and retirement.

The company also has a resource and referral service, offers flex time and telecommuting, and trains managers to be sensitive to employees' backgrounds and lifestyles.
Linking Workplace Diversity and Work and Family

Drawing upon their own observations and experiences, Symposium participants affirmed the Center's findings on how women of color experience their workplaces.

While the majority of participants did not report that their companies link diversity and work/family practices, they did say that workplace cultures must change to meet the needs of women of color.

"Companies need to change what is valued and expected so we do not lose extremely talented people," said Jodi Fuller, Women's Health Manager at Fannie Mae.

Underscoring the Center's research findings, several participants discussed the need to link policies governing diversity with those concerning work and family issues.

"One of the fundamental tenets of diversity is supposed to be balance, this balance of work and family," said JoeAnn McPherson of AT&T.

"Women represent 60 percent of our work force," she said. "They are going to be a part of corporate America at all levels of business. And if, in fact, balance is so critical, then we'd best find a way to make that happen if we want to be successful."

Francine Riley of GTE reported that: "As we talked with employees, we recognized that we could not separate out work/family issues from diversity because we found out that people were very, very stressed. There was stress because we're going through reengineering and downsizing...there was a lot of stress around long workdays," she said. "But women were more stressed than men, because they were not only stressed in the workplace, but then they went home and they had the second shift at home. And so we recognized we had to do some things around the work/family issues."

Gene Andrews of GE discussed the imperative for companies to research and understand the needs of women of color, who may face the challenge of working in an environment that is not "diversity friendly" while still trying to juggle family and work responsibilities.
"We can talk about work/family issues as they impact executive white women and then talk about how they impact executive women of color, but we’ve got to understand that those two groups very often come from totally different backgrounds," Andrews said.

"Very often, executive white women can go back to their support group, their male support group, and talk about these issues, include their family, and have an understanding of what it’s like to work in corporate America," he said.

"But women of color very often represent the first generation in corporate America. And they don’t have anybody they can go home and talk to about these issues because for their family members, it may not be a world that they experienced," he said.

Edna Viruell, Director of Research at the Center for Women Policy Studies, warned participants who are seeking to make the linkage between work and family and workplace diversity that “we cannot think about these issues in a linear way. We are looking at people’s lives and these consist of very complex arrangements and interactions. We need to understand that women of color do not compartmentalize their experiences as employees seeking advancement and their experiences as workers who are balancing work and family.”

**Stress and Promotions**

Symposium participants also commented on the Center’s finding that many women of color face acute stress as a result of hostile workplace cultures. "Many of the women in our focus groups report that they are passed over for promotions,” said Jennifer Tucker, Vice President of the Center for Women Policy Studies. “And so they would all say, ‘I want to be promoted on merit. I don’t want to have to socialize and drink beer and play golf to get there.’ Yet they recognize that being passed over is a part of a discriminatory system.”

To some extent, the Center’s research suggests that this is what creates the environment for “burnout avoidance strategies.” Many of the women have given up hope that what they believe in — hard work and
merit — will ever be enough to bring them success without transformation of their workplace cultures.

One senior manager noted that it can be especially difficult for women at lower-level jobs when their male supervisors are insensitive to their needs.

"The one self-report that really affected me the most was the case of an African American woman who was a single parent, with two children; she had worked for the company for many years, but because of the stresses of sexism and racism on the plant floor she found herself in the hospital for about three weeks because she just couldn't take it any more," said a Symposium participant.

"So here's a woman who wanted to work and wanted to provide for her family, but the environment was really not family-friendly or supportive."

Several senior managers also expressed concern that high levels of stress lead some women of color to decline opportunities for advancement.

One participant put it succinctly: "If advancement means giving up the rest of your life, then I think a lot of very talented people will say, 'No thank you.'"

"One of the things that's really interesting about what these women are saying is that they think this higher level position is going to be bad stress," said another participant, "instead of believing that the advancement, the control, gives you more flexibility."

One of the senior managers spoke of this phenomenon from personal experience: "I have a 13-year-old daughter. She says, 'You're never here.' I'm afraid that if I had another position at a higher level with more responsibility and more stress, I would see her even less. So I did make a conscious decision to say, 'Not now. I'll think about that maybe in a year or two.' But you should not have to make that kind of a decision, because there should be a balance," she said.
Burnout Avoidance Strategies:  
A New Frontier

The Center’s findings on “Burnout Avoidance Strategies” (BAS) resonated with Symposium participants, who were especially interested in strategies that women use to remove themselves from hostile work environments.

For these corporate managers, “Burnout Avoidance Strategies” took on special significance because they clearly lead to a loss of productivity and revenue for employers. BAS findings represent a new frontier for them, particularly the “mental check-outs” women use to escape the hostilities of the workplace while remaining on the job.

“What’s really of interest to me is not the turnover so much as the people who are at their desks every day but who have mentally checked out and what the cost is to the organization and to themselves of those burnout avoidance techniques,” said Patricia Wu-Murad of United Technologies.

“If you think about our own companies and working with each other, I think that’s really the frontier for us,” she added.

Participants urged the Center to conduct more research at specific companies about the kinds of interventions and strategies they could use to avoid or minimize “Burnout Avoidance Strategies” in their workplaces.

A Need for More Research

Symposium participants applauded the Center’s research and urged that the work continue, especially inside companies, to give a clearer image of the workplace environment. They expressed a desire for quantitative data as well as more in-depth qualitative data and for research that explains the implications for business, with recommendations for institutional change.
“There’s a lot of data on what men have experienced and there is also an increasing amount of data on what white women experience in the workplace,” said Gene Andrews of GE. “There is clearly a dearth of information on the experiences of women of color.” He said that research and strategies should “segment the workforce” focusing separately on the experiences of African American, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women.

Clearly, there is a need for more research to further our understanding of how to link diversity and work/family issues in a way that addresses the experiences and perceptions of working women of color. This research will not only positively affect the lives of women of color but also will help employers remain productive and competitive.

Conclusion: Transforming Workplace Cultures

Our workplaces have changed dramatically over the past two decades as more women have gone to work outside of the home and racial/ethnic segregation in the workplace has begun to decrease. Employers have implemented innovative programs and policies to accommodate these changes.

Yet more change is needed as we enter a new century. Demographic outlooks project that white women and women and men of color will continue to be the largest influx of workforce participants as we enter the new millennium.

Real change in the workplace must be systemic; it will occur only when we move beyond the fragmentary approach, creating programs and policies to respond to specific problems. Instead, employers will need to look at their total work environments with a critical eye and build workplaces that make all employees feel valued, that help them balance their work and personal lives, and that recognize the complexity of their lives.

The employers that make these linkages between work and family and workplace diversity a centerpiece of this transformational effort will be the big winners in the global economy.
1. Both sets of focus groups were conducted with Latinas, African American, Asian American and Native American women between the ages of 25 and 50 years old with at least one child under the age of 12. Each woman had completed at least two years of post-secondary education. The focus group participants did not know each other and had virtually no knowledge of what topics they would be asked to discuss prior to arriving at the focus group facility. Each focus group ran approximately two hours.

The women were employed in a variety of fields, including retail, state and local government, banking and finance, public education, medical education, accounting, marketing, telecommunications, criminal justice, cargo shipping, construction, engineering, publishing, and not-for profit organizations. They were employed as teachers, nurses, social workers, accountants, secretaries, clerks, sales associates, clerk supervisors, laboratory technicians, university fundraisers, senior case processors, children’s clothes designers, insurance claims analysts, PBX operators, office managers, medical assistants, day care managers, sales managers, auditors, employment specialists, project managers, and public relations specialists, for example.

The first set of six focus groups were conducted in Los Angeles and Denver with women earning between $20,000 to $35,000 annually; the second set of ten focus groups were held in San Francisco and Chicago with women whose personal earnings were $20,000 to $55,000.


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About the Center for Women Policy Studies

The Center for Women Policy Studies is an independent, national, multiethnic and multicultural feminist policy research and advocacy institution. founded in 1972.

The Center addresses cutting edge issues that have significant implications for women. The Center’s work seeks to incorporate the perspectives of women, in all their diversity, in the formulation of public policy that ensures the just and equitable treatment of women.

The Center’s work reflects the belief that all issues affecting women are interrelated and that policy research, analyses and proposals must reflect women’s diversity — by race and ethnicity, economic status, sexual orientation, age and disability. The Center believes that community leaders, philanthropy and the business community share responsibility with government for ensuring women’s rights and justice.