

## WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY AND WOMEN OF COLOR

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*Workplace flexibility is essential for all workers, but especially for low-wage, low-skilled workers, many of whom are women of color, face substantial barriers to becoming economically secure, and are often denied the same flexible work arrangements provided to middle-wage and higher-income professional workers.*



Workplace flexibility initiatives have gained traction in U.S. workplaces in recent years, as employers and workers strive to respond to the shifting needs and demographics of America's workforce. Women now comprise approximately half of all U.S. workers and over 70 percent of all mothers with children under 18 are active in the labor market.<sup>1</sup> Among single parent households, rates are even higher, with more than three quarters of all single women mothers working in 2009.<sup>2</sup>

The long-term economic security of American families is increasingly reliant on women's wages, and the role of caretaker has shifted as a result. Women are still more likely than men to be caretakers for children, spouses, and/or parents,<sup>3</sup> yet they are not more likely to have access to flexible workplaces.<sup>4</sup> This brief will assess the impact and importance of workplace flexibility arrangements for women of color, particularly Black and Hispanic workers, who are less likely to have flexible schedules,<sup>5</sup> access to paid sick leave,<sup>6</sup> and other work supports.

### **Defining Workplace Flexibility**

While there are several definitions of workplace flexibility, for the purpose of this brief workplace flexibility refers to:

- Flexible work arrangements (including alternate, preferred, and modified work schedules, flexibility in the amount of hours worked, including part-time or part-year work, and flexibility in determining the place where work is conducted)
- Time off (for extended, short-term, and episodic periods)
- Supported career maintenance and reentry (e.g., "on ramps" for individuals returning to the workforce after leaving for an extended period of time, whether out of necessity or personal choice)
- Paid leave and paid sick days (which can be used for a worker to care for his/her self, children, spouse, parents, and other kin)
- Access to affordable, quality child care

### **Why Access to Workplace Flexibility Matters for Women of Color**

In 2009, Black women had the highest labor force participation rates among women with 63 percent of all Black women working. White women and Hispanic women fell closely behind with labor force participation rates of 60 percent and 59 percent, respectively.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the prevalence of women of color in the workforce, Black and Hispanic women workers are less likely to benefit from flexible work arrangements than their white counterparts. Single mothers are also more likely to be burdened with particularly rigid schedules.<sup>8</sup>

In *Women in America*, the Obama Administration's 2011 report on indicators of social and economic well-being among women, the U.S. Department of Commerce and Executive Office of the President noted that fewer Black and Hispanic women have

flexible schedules than white and Asian women workers. Whereas approximately 30 percent of white and Asian workers had the ability to vary their work hours, about 20 percent of Black and Hispanic workers held positions that offered similar flexibility. As noted in *Women in America*, the prevalence of flexible work arrangements varies considerably by occupation. Occupational segmentation, educational disparities, and the racialized gap between low-skilled and high-skilled labor often create significant barriers between women of color and workplace flexibility policies.

### **The Obama Administration: Prioritizing Workplace Flexibility Initiatives**

The Obama Administration has been a leader in advancing and promoting workplace flexibility arrangements throughout the country. In March 2010, the Executive Office of the President’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) issued the report *Work-Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility*, which noted, among other things, that less-skilled workers had less workplace flexibility than high-skilled workers. The report also articulated the business case for workplace flexibility, affirming the benefits to employers of reduced absenteeism, lower turnover rates, healthier workers, and increased productivity. The report was released as part of the White House Council on Women and Girls Flexibility Forum.<sup>9</sup> In announcing the Forum on Workplace Flexibility, President Obama reiterated the critical link between workplace flexibility and economic security, stating: “Millions of women and men across the country struggle to balance the demands of their jobs and the needs of their families. Too often, caring for a child or an aging parent can strain a career—sometimes to the point of job loss.... Working Americans [should] not have to choose between their careers and meeting the needs of their families.”<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau has called national attention to the importance of workplace flexibility policies through a series of National Dialogues on Workplace Flexibility held in 17 sites,<sup>11</sup> including four major events in Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City.<sup>12</sup> These regional and national convenings bring together business leaders, workers, unions, advocates, educators, researchers, and other critical stakeholders to share best practices for successfully introducing or expanding flexible arrangements in the workplace. The National Dialogues address specific topics related to workplace flexibility, such as increasing access to workplace flexibility policies for low-wage workers and the unique challenges and solutions for small businesses, manufacturing industries, and white-collar companies in implementing flexible work options. Workplace flexibility is one of the Bureau’s top four priorities.

The Administration’s reports and policy forums on flexible work arrangements are important not only because they facilitate the sharing and adoption of workplace flexibility strategies, but also because they send a clear message to the nation that workplace flexibility policies will advance the long-term economic security of American workers.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Workplace flexibility is essential for all workers, but especially for low-wage, low-skilled workers, many of whom are women of color, face substantial barriers to becoming economically secure, and are often denied the same flexible work arrangements provided to middle-wage and higher-income professional workers.<sup>13</sup> Flexible workplaces bear great advantages both for workers and businesses and should be widely adopted to meet the changing needs of a changing workforce. As an example, expanded access to flexible work schedules would allow more workers to pursue higher education opportunities, strengthening a worker’s skills and contributions to the labor force while also increasing the worker’s knowledge, marketability, and opportunities for career advancement and higher earnings. This exchange is especially beneficial as demands for analytical skills increase in the labor market.

To ensure that flexible workplaces are widely available for women of color, their families, and communities, the following policies should be adopted:

- Continue to prioritize and promote workplace flexibility policies at the Administrative level, expanding on the benefits to employers, employees, and the economy to encourage buy-in from businesses and policymakers.
- Incentivize flexible work arrangements by providing tax breaks or comparable incentives to businesses and organizations that meet minimum federal workplace flexibility standards (e.g., paid time off, supported career reentry, etc.).
- Mandate that employers provide a minimum number of flexible work programs to all employees, similar to universal minimum wage laws.
- Pass the recently reintroduced Healthy Families Act to ensure that millions of workers receive up to seven paid sick days each year. Paid sick days help employees balance work, family, and personal needs, especially for low-income workers who might otherwise experience job loss or loss of income for taking time off.

- Increase funding for child care subsidies in the federal FY 2012 budget and expand eligibility guidelines for families to participate in the program. Many women of color, particularly single mothers, depend on child care subsidies to meet work obligations and afford high-quality care. Reliable child care is essential for working parents at all income levels, but especially for low-wage workers who face barriers to participation, including non-standard schedules and limited workplace flexibility.
- Support education and training for women and communities of color that prepare them for entering occupations and fields with greater workplace flexibility and opportunities for career advancement. Training programs and initiatives should include soft as well as hard skill development and focus on employment maintained over time rather than placement alone.
- Utilize allocated resources, affirmative action programs, and antidiscrimination legislation to increase the representation and promote the advancement of racial and ethnic minorities in the workforce, particularly in targeted middle- or higher-wage occupations that offer expanded flexible work arrangements. Policies and programs should provide incentives to encourage businesses to recruit and maintain women of color employees and counter racial and gender discrimination in the labor market.

Enacting these policies would support working parents, especially low-income single mothers, as they juggle work and family responsibilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Increased workplace flexibility would not only strengthen America's workforce—it would have beneficial financial implications for a country mired in debt. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis recently cited a study suggesting that flexible work programs could lead to national cost savings of \$2.2 million.<sup>14</sup>

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(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce and Executive Office of the President, *Women in America*, available at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/Women\\_in\\_America.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/Women_in_America.pdf) (last accessed May 19, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Donelan, Falik, and DesRoches, as cited in the National Women's Health Information Center, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Literature Review on Effective Sex- and Gender-Based Systems/Models of Care*, available at <http://womenshealth.gov/archive/owh/multidisciplinary/reports/GenderBasedMedicine/Background.cfm> (last accessed May 19, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>*Women in America*, *supra* note 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), *Paid Sick Day Access Rates by Gender and Race/Ethnicity, 2010*, available at <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/paid-sick-day-access-rates-by-gender-and-race-ethnicity-2010/> (last accessed May 19, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>*Women in America*, *supra* note 1.

<sup>8</sup>Economic Policy Institute (EPI), *Working Mothers in a Double Bind: Working Moms, Minorities Have the Most Rigid Schedules, and are Paid Less for the Sacrifice*, available at <http://www.epi.org/page/-/old/briefingpapers/124/124.pdf> (last accessed May 24, 2011).

<sup>9</sup>White House Council on Women and Girls, *A Conversation on Workplace Flexibility*, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/04/01/a-conversation-workplace-flexibility> (last accessed May 24, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *White House Announces Forum on Workplace Flexibility*, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/white-house-announces-forum-workplace-flexibility> (last accessed March 23, 2010).

<sup>11</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, *Nevada Statewide Dialogue on Workplace Flexibility Explores Challenges and Opportunities for Today's Workforce*, available at [http://www.dol.gov/wb/media/NDWF\\_SF\\_.htm](http://www.dol.gov/wb/media/NDWF_SF_.htm) (last accessed May 24, 2011).

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, *National Dialogue on Workplace Flexibility*, available at <http://www.dol.gov/dol/workplaceflexibility/> (last accessed May 24, 2011).

<sup>13</sup>Today's Workplace: A Workplace Flexibility Blog, *Poor, Pregnant, and Fired: Caregiver Discrimination Against Low-Wage Workers*, available at <http://www.todayworkplace.org/2011/04/01/poor-pregnant-and-fired-caregiver-discrimination-against-low-wage-workers/> (last accessed May 24, 2011).

<sup>14</sup>Whittier Daily News, *Solis Calls for Workplace Flexibility at Pasadena Conference*, available at [http://www.whittierdailynews.com/news/ci\\_17418894#ixzz1Lz7B8TQb](http://www.whittierdailynews.com/news/ci_17418894#ixzz1Lz7B8TQb) (last accessed May 24, 2011).