

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

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.

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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.

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