

**Statement of the Center for Women Policy Studies
Before the
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission**

**Meeting on “Perspectives on Work/Family Balance and the Federal Equal
Employment Opportunity Laws”
April 17, 2007**

**By Jennifer Tucker
Vice President**

On behalf of the Center for Women Policy Studies, I extend my sincere appreciation to the Commission for the invitation to provide a statement this morning on the very important and often overlooked issues of women of color caregivers in the workplace.

The Center for Women Policy Studies is a multiethnic and multicultural feminist policy research, analysis and advocacy organization, which brings women’s diverse voices to important public policy debates – on women and HIV/AIDS, violence against women and girls, welfare reform, educational equity, employers’ work/family and workplace diversity policies, reproductive rights and health, international trafficking of women and girls, and many other critical issues.

My statement draws upon the Center’s research with working women of color, in particular, our **National Women of Color Work/Life Survey** – the first such quantitative study to focus on how women of color in corporate America experience the oft-discussed work/life balancing act.¹

While it is virtually impossible to pick up a magazine or newspaper these days without seeing something about the constellation of issues called "work/life" -- almost nowhere can we find any discussion of these issues from the diverse perspectives of the fastest growing segment of the work force -- women of color.

Further, even where there is some attention paid to women of color, we rarely look at the diversity and complexity of the population -- which includes, at minimum, African American women and other women of African descent, Latinas, Native American and Alaska Native women, and Asian American and Pacific Islander women. Instead, most studies, reports, and conferences opt for one or the other.

But it is a hallmark of the Center's work to look at the combined impact of gender, race/ethnicity and economic status -- to ensure that we present the broadest and deepest possible analyses for decision makers in both the public policy arena and the private sector.

¹ This statement is based upon key findings from Tucker, J., Wolfe, L.R., Viruell-Fuentes, E. A., and Smooth, W. 1999. *No More “Business As Usual”: Women of Color in Corporate America – Report of the National Women of Color Work/Life Survey*. Washington, D.C: Center for Women Policy Studies.

We believe that the Center's research on women of color in the workplace contributes to filling the knowledge gap in this regard.

We began our research on working women of color over a decade ago by conducting two qualitative studies, using focus groups. We learned from these focus groups that women of color do not experience their workplace cultures with their race/ethnicity and sex neatly compartmentalized as two separate facts of life. While their treatment as “persons of color” is often considered a “workplace diversity issue” and their struggles to balance work and personal life responsibilities are considered a “work and family” or women’s issues by some employers, the lives of women of color not fit this mold. Some focus groups participants, for example, reported that when they request leave for family reasons to participate in a child’s extracurricular activity, they are treated differently by their supervisors than their white women colleagues. In these instances, what began as a work/life balancing issue crossed the invisible line to become differential treatment on the basis of race/ethnicity. Our learnings from the voices of the women in the focus groups; their experience and self-defined needs, led us to conduct the survey which provides additional evidence of the link between the caregiving responsibilities and disparate treatment in the workplace.

We conducted the **National Women of Color Work/Life Survey** in 16 Fortune 1000 companies and we were astonished at the high response rate to this very long survey. After all, it was 12 pages of difficult questions -- and it was distributed to women of color at the companies just a few weeks before Christmas. Fifteen hundred women -- 22 percent of these incredibly busy women -- on all rungs of the corporate ladder and from a diverse group of companies -- sent back their completed surveys; and many wrote pages of comments as well.

The women in this survey were intimately acquainted with the daily pressures of juggling work and personal life responsibilities. Nearly one half (47 percent) of the women are in the “sandwich” generation where they are responsible for the care of a dependent adult and a child under age 18. The results of our survey present the Commission with a snapshot of women of color and their lives as they seek to fulfill their roles as both caregivers and workers.

The survey results produced five major findings that relate to: workplace cultures; the link between workplace cultures and work/life balance; the impact of workplace stress on work/life balance and on women's personal lives; the coping strategies women use to respond and; the importance of supportive workplace cultures in helping employees maintain work/life balance -- and in encouraging them to remain with their companies.

But rather than simply walking through the report and highlighting these key findings, I would like to share with you our analysis of several significant cross cutting themes, which we believe have important implications for employers and for public policy.

First, substantial numbers of women of color are proud to work for their companies and feel that they are full partners or key players on their business unit teams -- that's the

good news. But, they also say that they would not recommend their company to a friend for its commitment to diversity, they have limited opportunities for advancement within the company, they doubt top management's commitment to diversity and they doubt the efficacy and safety of networking with colleagues.

And many women also report that their workplace cultures are often alienating and uncomfortable -- describing the elements of a hostile working environment. For example, in this era when sexual and racial harassment cases increasingly are in the news and the courts, it is significant that most women of color -- on all rungs of the corporate ladder -- report that they hear sexual, racial and homophobic jokes in the workplace.

And even though we have some good news in the fact that most women say they feel free to be themselves at work -- a significant number also do not, believing that they must play down their race and/or their gender to get ahead and fit into their corporate cultures. They also perceive race and sex discrimination, as a barrier both to career advancement and to equitable treatment of their work/family needs.

All of this leads us to suspect that when many women of color express pride in working for their companies -- they may be expressing pride in themselves, in their own accomplishments, their own success in navigating the corporate workplace, and perhaps in their own achievement in even getting into corporate America at all.

A second cross-cutting theme relates to the way women of color define and experience workplace stress -- and its impact on their work/life balance, their health and their commitment to their company. Indeed, for many women of color, workplace stress is the result not only of excessive workloads and the "unspoken message" to work long hours to get ahead, but also of work/life conflicts and unsupportive managers -- and finally, of work environments that feel uncomfortable. In short, the stress of bias also damages women's personal and family lives and affects not only their work/life balancing act but also their health.

When women of color feel these extreme stresses, however, they do not believe that they can count on their companies or managers to respond. Instead, women use coping strategies they can control at work -- what we have called "burnout avoidance strategies" or BAS -- and strategies that they can implement at home.

In a classic Catch-22, some of these strategies simply increase stress -- such as waking up earlier, for example -- and some have a potentially negative impact on their company -- such as leaving the company, feeling less committed to their employer, and taking more sick and vacation days.

We still remember one woman who participated in one of our earlier focus groups in Los Angeles; she said that her only relaxing time, time that she had just for herself, was during her commute to and from work -- on the LA freeways!

Finally, the third cross cutting theme is one of the study's most significant findings -- because it relates to the concerns of those women of color who are poised to crack the glass ceiling and move into top management.

These highly educated, talented and hard working women -- who are currently employed in director/manager positions -- are the high flyers in whom the company has made the largest investment of resources. Their talent and training make them extremely attractive to the competition.

Yet these are the survey respondents who report the greatest distress and dissatisfaction with their workplace cultures, which they experience as uncomfortable and hostile, unsupportive and stressful, and unwilling to support their work/life balancing act.

These women managers -- at both the senior and mid-levels -- also report the highest levels of stress, the greatest negative impact of workplace stress on their personal development, their family relationships and their health, and the most frequent use of those "burnout avoidance strategies." Most significantly, these also are the women who are most likely to consider taking their talent and training elsewhere as they look for career opportunities outside of their current companies. However, changing employers does not solve the problem.

It is time to break this cycle. We call upon this Commission to use its powers to ensure that women of color have the support they need to function in their dual roles as both caregivers and employees. The Commission can change workplaces by strongly enforcing the arsenal of equal employment opportunity laws under its authority.