WORK

Rethinking Work-Life Balance for Women of Color

And how white women got it in the first place.

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Editor's note, April 18, 2018: The original version of this article contained two sentences from an article in the Guardian without quotation marks or proper attribution. This is not up to Slate's standards and we regret the error. The post has been revised with attribution and a link to properly credit the Guardian and its writers, Molly Redden and Jana Kasperkevic.

The pushback against institutionalized work patterns and the movement for work-life balance is an emerging, yet critical wing of feminism that is long overdue. But this wave can't ignore the unique circumstances of women of color nor the socioeconomic dynamics of how white women came to even begin to have the conversation about work-life balance in the first place. Throughout history, white women have used the labor of women of color to reduce their own domestic burden and free themselves up for corporate and civic pursuits. Simply put, the labor of Black, Hispanic and Asian American women has raised white women's standard of living.

So if we're talking about work-life balance, let's be clear that many white women of means have achieved that balance standing on the backs of women of color.

After all, women of color's participation in the labor force has always outpaced that of white women. As early as 1900, 26 percent of married black women were employed, compared to only 3.2 percent of white women. Asian American wives also had high employment rates, according to Evelyn Nakano Glenn in "Cleaning Up/Kept Down: A Historical Perspective on Racial Inequality in 'Women's Work.' " And there was a time when the only work options available to women of color were doing the work that white women of means did not want to do. White women needed us and we needed them.

So we breast-fed your babies. We raised your children. We cleaned your houses. We did your laundry. We cooked your food.

By 1920, for example, black women comprised 82 percent of the female servants in the South; native born white women made up 15 percent and foreign born Whites accounted for the remaining three percent. In southwestern cities such as El Paso and Denver, approximately half of all employed Mexican women were domestic or laundry workers. In 1930, half of all employed Japanese women in the San Francisco Bay area were private household workers, according to Glenn. The cultural norm was concretized and repeated. Today, women of color and immigrants dominate the domestic worker ranks, comprising some 54 percent of that workforce compared to 46 percent whites. Yet, the 2012 Domestic Workers Survey found that white domestic workers had the highest median wages compared to women of color.

With much of the caring duties covered by women of color, many white women had the privilege to freely seek educational and other professional and civic opportunities. "Ironically, many white women fulfilled White society's expectation of feminine domesticity only through the domestic labor of their servants, who were women of color," Nakano Glenn writes.

While white women were on the come-up, black women's devalued identity as a means of labor was sealed, with very little regard for their own responsibilities as mothers and wives.

There was no flex time. No work from home options. Work-life balance was an impossible dream.

It was simple economics, and simple economics created different value systems that divide our priorities today. White women had money but wanted more time. Black and brown women needed more money. The limited ability of our men to find work that could solely sustain a family is a documented phenomenon and the subject of many a research papers, therefore our role as economic providers was critical for our family stability. In that regard, our personal value system as mothers was created around providing financially—not necessarily by the measure of "time spent." We took pride in seeing our children in new shoes, clean clothes or with fresh toys and books and we developed community mothering models with extended family members and other care-givers who gave "time" to our children. The money earned from work was our gateway to getting our children into good schools, having swimming or music lessons, and other experiences that would give them cultural and educational opportunities—things that white families could easily access. This was our pride and focus. This was our value system for mothering. Our matrix also included a trade off of time spent now for the chance of greater opportunities for our children later.

Much of that way of being still exists.

As do the economics. White women are calling for time to mother, but black women still need money to mother. While the male-female pay gap has been slowing decreasing, the pay gap between white women and black women is the fastest growing income inequality there is, according to a report by the Economic Policy Institute. In 1979, black women earned only 6 percent less than white women. Today, black women earn 19 percent less than white women, according the the report.

According to Molly Redden and Jana Kasperkevic who reported on the study in the Guardian, "At the beginning of the 1980s, black women with a college degree or higher and white women with a college degree or higher earned roughly the same wages. But today, wages for black women with a college degree or higher are 12.3 percent less than those of their white counterparts. That is double the disparity experienced by black women with only a high school degree," the report found.

About 28 percent of employed black women work in service occupations, the occupational group with the lowest wages. Jobs in this broad occupational group often lack important benefits such as paid sick days, according to a report by the Institute of Women's Policy Research.

So when looking at paid leave programs, a common demand of the work-life balance movement, we have to think about how they're structured and how that will affect women of color. When they offer a percentage of what the person already earned while she is on leave, that percentage will always be lower for women of color. For offerings that allow you to take out what you put in, black women will always have less to put in. It's essential then that at the very least, our future paid leave program gives a progressive wage replacement, ensuring that lower wage workers get 100 percent of their wages while on leave.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Add to that the complexity of women of color's own relationship to work. Historically, we have always worked and mothered. Many have even grown up seeing their mother and grandmother work more than one job. This is all we know. So the notion of having time to mother feels unfamiliar. There is still the social stigma of taking time off to mother—something black and brown women have never felt free to do. Ever since our bodies and our babies lost economic value, we have struggled to reassert our value as mothers and our importance in raising our own children. As I often say, black women in this country are viewed as perfectly acceptable and desirable for taking care of other's people children but somehow stereotyped as not being able to take care of their own.

And corporate environments can be particularly harsh to black and brown women. As one Latina corporate executive told me, "I was terrified to ask for flex-time when I had my children. For me, if I gave my company the impression that I was more interested in my family than the firm then it would take me off the advancement track or that it would somehow be used against me later," she said. "Women of color don't have the luxury of being perceived as weak or taking their foot off the corporate ladder rung for one minute."

Those who work in the companies that do offer flexible work options, are often afraid to take advantage of those perks, fearing that if they are perceived as needing help it will make them look weak or less committed. Taking time off or being perceived as not working hard is even riskier for women of color. Our corporate climb is not the same climb as for white women. It often feels more precarious, less sure-footed. And for many women, its a risk they are not willing to take.

Until flexible options are truly mainstream and socially acceptable, they can still be viewed as a "hand out," and in our culture we absolutely, positively cannot be viewed as taking a hand out. The Latina corporate executive says that in the corporate world, many white men look at women of color as "lucky" to have made it to such levels and unworthy of taking advantage of any benefits. (We've heard these "you should be grateful" sentiments uttered by the current President toward successful athletes and entertainers).

The real work is removing the stigma of flexible work and creating a nuanced understanding that women of color don't have the same relationship to work. White women must openly acknowledge the role women of color have played in their advancement and make sure all are included at the discussion table for new policies, innovative businesses and creating paradigm shifts.

If Walter Lippmann is correct in that we are "captive to the images in our heads." What are the images of motherhood and work that hold women of color captive? What are the images of who works for white women that holds white women captive?

We all need to break free and create new images for any of this to work.

In those images, black women are valued as nurturing, competent mothers, in their own communities and by white women. Every time I am in Starbucks reading the New York Times with my 13-year-old son, a white person will not feel compelled to come over and compliment me as if I'm doing something so extraordinary it requires commendation from a complete stranger. They come over because the image in their head of black mothers does not include reading the science section with a black boy. Why is that?

As black women, we may not have seen a woman of color who successfully took extended time off for mothering and returned without corporate penalty. How do we change that?

As women of color, we must examine our cultural association to being strong and not needing help and honestly ask, how has it served us? Black women have a greater mortality rate for nearly every disease there is. It is true that we have never been allowed to be "fragile" but many have taken the "strong black woman" thing on as a self-affirming identity. The truth is, at times it is crippling and counter productive.

What the flex time movement needs is an awareness to include the experiences of all women of color, not as token spokesperson ambassadors but as decision-makers involved in setting policy and rethinking norms. And let's expect white women to play their part not just as allies, but as co-liberators. Our freedoms and futures in the work world have always been interdependent and inextricably linked. Our reimagined work-life experience is connected to yours. We deserve a seat at this table, too.

We too are deserving of time. And it's about time.