



G.I.R.L.S. N DA HOOD
PRESENTS
7 GENERATIONS
OF
BRONX FEMMES

7 GENERATIONS OF BRONX FEMMES: A COMMUNITY-BASED REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project conducted by the G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood research team.

The research project titled, *7 Generations of Bronx Femmes* was conducted by young womyn, femmes and girls of color, living in and from the Bronx, New York, that have been impacted by the criminal legal system. Each member of the research team self identify as system impacted. Each team member's system impact may look different, however, they all share similar experiences of feeling marginalized, over policed, over-incarcerated, surveillanced, and excluded from criminal legal reforms. Each member of the team has experienced, either personally, or through familial and community relationships; arrest and/or incarceration. The participatory nature of this project made room for the researchers to use their own experiences as well as the experiences of others in the community to convey a story, about what system impact looks like and how programs and communities can use their collective power to respond to the needs of the community, curate programs and services that meet the needs of girls and young womyn and work toward ending incarceration. As a research team, we learned that anyone can be a researcher. We used PAR as the methodology of this research project because it offered a more inclusive and collective way to conduct research.

Prior to creating our research tools, we reflected on what resources we wanted to offer the participants after data collection was over. Too often, researchers ask participants questions that are very personal and often re-traumatizing and provide no follow up. We knew some of the questions we were asking would bring up past, possibly repressed traumas, not only for our girls but for our team as well. Throughout the research process, reflection and healing spaces were offered and many of these spaces continue

after the completion of the research process for young womyn who participated in the research.

A major part of this project was focusing on the relationships between womyn of color and learning about how those relationships healed and or hurt one another. We looked at these complex relationships in relation to each other, relation to the system, and the relationship womyn have with alternative to incarceration programs. We wanted to shed light on the obstacles our girls and young womyn in our community face when involved with the legal system.

As a team, we learned a lot through this process. We saw that when young womyn show up to court with a community advocate, their outcomes are better. During our focus groups we learned that the experiences of our girls are in connection to the generational experiences of the womyn that came before them. We saw how the system charges womyn more severely when they present or act in ways that are outside of gender norms. We learned that system contact for girls usually begins in the home and/or school. We learned that law enforcement is usually called first to de-escalate a domestic or home situation, when it should be community representatives. And we know from experience, and the participants reiterated the consequences of police involvement. We learned about the low level crimes girls are often convicted of and how those convictions push them into the legal system. We learned how the school to prison pipeline contributes significantly to our girls being arrested and detained. Participants talked about the metal detectors in the schools, the stories of young womyn being sexually harassed by school safety agents, and how young womyn who expressed anger, hurt, or pain were seen as “difficult.”

Research indicates that Black girls represented 56% of all girls disciplined, compared to white girls, who only represented only 5%.¹ This data point was confirmed, when girls we talked with provided stories of unfair and racist treatment in school. With each story, each survey, each trip inside detention facilities—we kept learning. Some girls had their first police contact at school for situations that could have been resolved if there was better communication between staff and students. We found that when girls advocate for themselves they are perceived as being loud, aggressive, and not obeying school rules. One young woman research participant shared that she no longer wanted to attend her current school, because her school was where she was arrested for an incident that was beyond her control. She expressed her desire to transfer schools, to avoid any further issues or re-arrest. The response she received from school

1. According to “Black Girls Matter: Pushed out, Overpoliced, and underprotected” In New York City.

representatives was, “it’s not the school it’s her,” and that “She needs to learn how to behave and follow the rules.” It seemed as though the system was setting her up to fail, again.

Through this research process, we saw how womyn are constantly showing up for other womyn. Womyn are perpetually met with the challenges of being “strong” and trying to lift the burden for others. Historically, womyn of color have always been a backbone, a keystone, and a foundation for their family and the community. This has been an aspect of the lives of womyn of color, from slavery to the civil rights movement. Womyn have always protected their families and and shown up for men. During the height of the prison industrial complex, womyn were single mothers to their children, breadwinners for their families and continued to visit men in prison and financially support them. However, when the tables are turned womyn do not experience the same level of support from men when they need it.

During the research process, it was clear that families do not receive adequate support while navigating the legal system. Most survey respondents said that either their mother, grandmother, or femme friend went to court with them, however, most of those supportive womyn that helped them while directly in the system, were not part of programs after they were released. The people that provide support to girls on the front end of their system contact should also be included in the structured support on the back end of their system contact.

We also learned that these are issues that impact Black, Brown, and immigrant young womyn. Nearly 98% of the respondents identified as a womyn of color, and 28% of those respondents reported that they were first generation U.S. citizens. These womyn and girls had unique experiences with the criminal legal system. Language and culture barriers played a part in police contact and also impacted whether parents or guardians showed up to court to support their daughters, nieces, cousins, granddaughters and other family members. During an interview, a young womyn expressed how she didn’t want her mom to show up to court because her mom did not speak English. She was scared her mother would be treated poorly because she would not understand what was happening.

Trauma and system contact were large parts of this research project. During our intergenerational focus group, one of our grandmothers in the community communicated that there is no space for older womyn to express themselves. This sentiment was vocalized many times throughout the research project. Our mothers, aunts, grandmothers all went through traumatic legal system related events in their lives, but felt they did not have an avenue to speak about their experiences or openly engage in a community of healing. Unhealed pain impacts relationships. We

“HISTORICALLY, WOMYN OF COLOR HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A BACKBONE, A KEYSTONE, AND A FOUNDATION FOR THEIR FAMILY AND THE COMMUNITY. THIS HAS BEEN AN ASPECT OF THE LIVES OF WOMYN OF COLOR, FROM SLAVERY TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. WOMYN HAVE ALWAYS PROTECTED THEIR FAMILIES AND AND SHOWN UP FOR MEN.... HOWEVER, WHEN THE TABLES ARE TURNED WOMYN DO NOT EXPERIENCE THE SAME LEVEL OF SUPPORT FROM MEN WHEN THEY NEED IT.”

need spaces for womyn across generations to heal and support one another.

Many of the research participants talked about their role as nurturers and caretakers of their younger siblings or older brothers. They shared about the often spoken and sometimes unspoken requirements to cook, clean and help with homework. These, in addition to the racist views of Black and Brown womyn and girls being perceived as older than they are, causes society to see and treat these girls as adults. This reading of girls as adult mature womyn increases the susceptibility of police contact, and harsher punishments. Mothers and guardians need support and affordable childcare, so they do not so heavily rely on their daughters, and girls need spaces to just be girls. As a group, we learned how important it is to hold space for young womyn of color to focus on self care and build self confidence. Girls that participated in our research project shared stories on how the male-centered alternative to incarceration programs, and other system related programs made them feel invisible. The girls talked about being the only girl in the room. They said, the language, activities, staffing and leadership were all created with a male-focused lens, so they did not feel seen, heard or served. Because girls are often juggling many roles; daughter, mother, friend, student, teacher, caretaker, breadwinner and system involved, it was often hard for them to attend system mandated programs and missing a mandated program can result in a probation violations that can lead to being remanded and re-incarcerated. Young people should be able to navigate the complexities of their lives and their responsibilities without the threat of being pushed further into the system.

This project was more than just research, data and findings. It opened a space for womyn to share their experiences with other womyn who have or are going through similar circumstances. This project created a platform to reach system impacted young womyn, girls and femmes, and we hope it has also opened up communication to reach girls before they enter the system.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, and far prior, advocates, researchers, policy makers, educators, community members, and impacted populations have used their voices and platforms to call attention to the punitive and unfair policies that lead to the crisis of incarceration in the United States.

Public debates continue to increase on the high social, political, and economic cost of over-policing and locking people up. Because of this, cities and states across the country have begun to create policies that work toward de-incarceration and anti-incarceration. In 2011, California's realignment policy decreased the numbers of people in state prisons, in 2017 New York City began a city-wide campaign to close Riker's Island, one of the most populous jails in the country, Raise the Age initiatives sparked across the United States, and in particular, states like New York and North Carolina used Raise the Age as reminders that young people are also deeply impacted by systems of punishment and social divestment.

However, in the midst of the changing political climate, political conversations and high-stakes campaigns, often the voices and experiences of specific marginalized groups are ignored and overlooked. This report is an exploration into how the legal system¹ impacts young womyn² of color in the Bronx and their femme

1. We choose to use the term legal system in lieu of justice system. We want to recognize that at an ideological and institutional level, the justice system has been born out of a history of racism, patriarchy, classism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and chattel slavery. These legacies that are held within the bars and the policies that put people behind those bars, fundamentally, are not based in an ethic of justice. The legal system refers to the set of agencies and process established by governments to control and crime and enforce laws. If you'd like to learn more about these issues, the language we use, and alternative definitions of justice, please reference our Resource Page in the back of this report

2. This spelling is a way of redefining and reimagining womyn, girls, and femmes, out of the construct of patriarchy. We define girls to the largest extent of the gender spectrum, seeing all bodies that identify as femme as such. And throughout this report we will use the words womyn, femmes, and girls interchangeably to speak about and represent all individuals that identify as feminine of center on the spectrum of gender identity. This is in part because both the participants and the researchers of this report vary in how they identify, and in an effort to be inclusive, all terms are used, however they are in reference to the same population. For more information on the difference between gender, sex, gender identity, gender expressions, and gender roles, please see our Glossary in the back of this report

relationships. Nuances of lives, particularly those lives that are on the margins, out of the spotlight, can get drowned out, even in the arena of social change. The purpose of this report is to elevate the nuances of their experiences, engage with the details, and learn from the experience of those living lives in the margins.

Research and conversation on the issues surrounding the legal system, do not center the lives and experiences of womyn of color. Womyn, and especially young womyn, are often the silent victims of the carcel system. Because of this, womyn are overlooked as being part of the system of mass punishment, and predictably not considered as knowledgeable and capable of being both part of the system and becoming the experts on change. However, this report offers an alternative to that. The research conducted in this report was done by young womyn of color, that too have been impacted by the legal system. This report is a reflection of our lives, our research and work that sees social justice as an act of imagining a new world, new structures, and new architects of change.



HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

UNDERSTAND OUR PHILOSOPHY.

This is a work of intention. The language, the structure of the report and the research questions that were are all grounded in a particular ethic and sense of participation and responsibility. While this is woven throughout the report, this is highlighted in section; Who We Are + The Project (reference page X_).

CONSIDER THE DATA

The researchers for this report used surveys, focus groups, and interviews to collect data. We explored the intersections of gender, incarceration, and relationship for womyn of color. For specific data on these, see section; Research Themes + Findings (page _____).

IMPLEMENT THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in this report were created using the research and data collected from the community. We believe that change is possible and critically necessary. For programmatic recommendations, see section; Recommendations for Change + Visions Forward (page _____).

PERSONAL REFLECTION

On the most intimate level, these issues challenged us, as a community to ask hard and tough questions of ourselves. Throughout the report, we have included “Interactive Questions” that can be used as facilitation guides, writing prompts, journal entries, or meditative reflections. Look out for them in the margins and between paragraphs. The questions are purposed to facilitate personal reflection while reading the report.

SHARE + COMMUNITY BUILD

This work is deeply nested in a history, movement, and community of social justice. People power and the possibilities of collective change require the sharing of information. For a quick synopsis of the report to share with others, see the Executive Summary (page _____) or the “Resource Page” (page _____).

Ultimately, within these lines and words, we hope you see our leadership, our expertise, and our wisdom.



WHO WE ARE + THE PROJECT

The researchers of this report are a collective body within Community Connections for Youth (CCFY), a New York City based non-profit with a mission to mobilize, Indigenous, faith and neighborhood organizations to develop effective community-based alternative-to-incarceration programs for youth.

CCFY believes that increasing local community capacity to work with youth and families in the justice system is the key to reducing youth incarceration, system contact, and improving long-term life outcomes for youth. The core Participatory Action Research (PAR) team referred to as *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood* (Grace, Inquiry, Research, Love, and Seen) are CCFY staff, graduates of programs within CCFY, former participants, allies, and leaders within the organization.

G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood, are also mentors with United Playaz of New York (UPofNY), a violence prevention organization dedicated to promoting peace and empowering youth to contribute positively and participate fully in their communities. Through our collective experiences with CCFY and UPofNY, *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood* are deeply engaged with on-the ground, community-based programs that work to dismantle the current form of the legal system and instead, create restorative spaces for young people and youth leaders to grow, explore, heal, and learn.

G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood consists of Bronx-based female identifying femmes/gender non-conforming (GNC)/non-binary individuals. We are a community based, intergenerational, multi-racial, bi-coastal team that have each been impacted by the legal system in various ways. As a team, we have dedicated ourselves to the betterment of our communities. We have chosen to use our experiences, as

system-impacted individuals to facilitate change within ourselves and our communities. Our commitment to our community grows from a place of love, honor, and accountability. We radically do this work to make space for ourselves and femmes of color to live in the fullness of their truth.

G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood's work reaches beyond conducting workshops, forums, and panels, but also works to engage our community at cookouts, barbecues, and block parties. We show up for justice work and for the turn up! *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood* represents the things that make New York and the Bronx special and unique. We have linked our liberation to our open and variant expressions of independence and freedom, and pride ourselves on being fly, fierce, and marching to the beat of our own drum. We see “letting our hair down” as a radical act of self-love and do not hesitate to take part in it. As a collective, we live at the intersections of what it means to be Brown, Black, Indigenous, of color, femme, system impacted, and beautiful. We are daughters, sons, nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts, and uncles and use each one of those identities to inform our work. It is through these identities and activities that we move against the traumas of our existence. This report is our truth; the honest, sometimes heartbreaking truth of our existence in this country and in our city.



WHY WE DO THIS WORK

We do this work because we are committed to undoing the consistent erasure and silencing of Black and Brown femmes. We envision a world where womanist equity includes conversations about the effects of systemic oppression. One of the adverse effects of oppression is the inability to see past the glass ceiling. We consider it our duty to push back on the negative, limiting, and derogatory stereotypes that stifle our abundance. We see these legacies of resilience and resistance. Through this report, we sought to find the nuance in our everyday lived experiences while simultaneously grappling with the realities of who we are as contradictions in this society.

We seek to right the wrongs created by systemic oppression and build a better future for ourselves and those who will come after us. Our team has chosen to use our access, as system-impacted folk working within the paradigms of incarceration and legislation, as power to facilitate change within ourselves and communities. Our commitment comes from a place far beyond sympathy and instead grows from a place of love, honor, and accountability. We radically do this work to make space for ourselves and femmes of color to live in the fullness of their truth. As liaisons of our community, we actively choose to place the needs and concerns of those affected by the harsh reality of the carceral state of America as high priority. We live in a way that is committed to undoing the

consistent erasure and silencing of Black and Brown femmes in our present and past society. We work to envision a world where womanist equity reaches past white feminist pink pussy hats and “this pussy grabs back” sex politics but to the intersections of Black, femme, and incarcerated. We dig deep in our well of joy as a means of sustainability and fortitude. We choose to love, laugh, and live openly! We are both teacher and student and glean from those who have paved the way for us.

Throughout this project, we were reminded that no voice was silent, but many went unheard. Our responsibility was to pass the mic and amplify those voices. As individuals that live, love, and exist in the Bronx, we specifically worked to conduct ethical research for this project. Research that did not re-traumatize those that participated or ourselves. We did this by understanding and not replicating the unethical practices of research projects that have harmed communities of color in the past, provided time and encouraged deep personal reflections, self-care, and made sure to check each other and our privilege flare-ups. We wanted this project to be real and authentic, a project that reflected our experiences and our lives. We wanted this project to be a reflection of *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood*.

INTERACTIVE QUESTION

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF WITHOUT MENTIONING TITLE/OCCUPATION?

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT + PROJECT

Our PAR project was birthed out of curiosity about the way womyn, girls, and femmes experience the legal system,. Data shows that Black womyn are the fastest growing prison population, and between 1980 and 2014 the number of womyn currently incarcerated increased 700 percent.¹ Girls are often held in custody longer than boys for similar offenses,² and femmes are targeted at higher rates for quality-of-life issues, which often translates into harsh punishments for behavior that is seen as deviating away from the social norms of femininity (Ocen 2013). However, these data and statistics only provide numbers to what we already know to be true, because we are the faces of these statistics. We have lived these experiences. Young womyn have told us that safety agents in their schools go back and forth between asking for their number and then reprimanding them for “being too pretty to fight.” We have had police officers snidely whisper to us that they will, “put us in handcuffs—you know, the pink furry kind,” when we pass them on the street. We see how womyn fill the visiting lines at Riker’s Island, but when incarcerated, the visiting rooms can feel empty and the people that do visit, are other womyn. Incarceration impacts womyn. And we wanted to know more.

1. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Incarcerated-women-and-Girls.pdf>
2. <https://www.vera.org/projects/the-initiative-to-end-girls-incarceration/learn-more>

WE WALK WITH SEVEN GENERATIONS OF ANCESTORS BEHIND US AND THE WORK WE DO IN OUR LIFETIME IMPACTS SEVEN GENERATIONS AFTER US.

We were interested in understanding the complexity of girls impacted by the legal system and the complexity of their relationships. We were curious to know:

- How girls and young womyn sustained and developed relationships; whether, beautiful, strained, supportive, and/or hurtful; and
- We wanted to understand these relationships particularly within a harsh and punitive system generally centered around men and/or masc-of-center³ individuals; and
- We wanted to know how girls and young womyn find healing;
- What are the ways girls and young womyn's relationships with other womyn in their lives impact their system involvement; and
- We wanted to know how girls girls and young womyn are able to overcome the cyclical nature of the legal system in accordance to their womynhood.

These questions and our own experiences fueled our research.

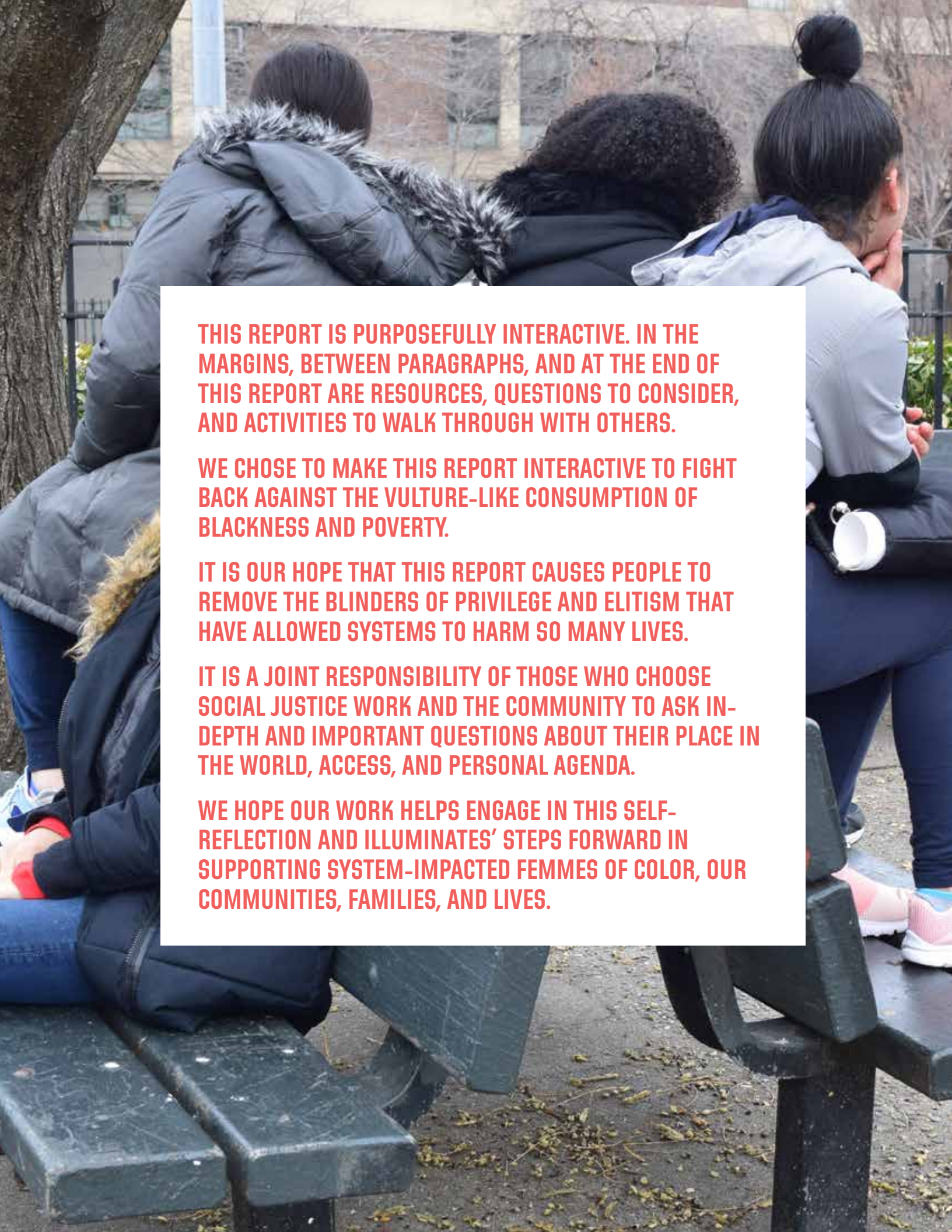
This report is purposefully interactive. In the margins, between paragraphs, and at the end of this report are resources, questions to consider, and activities to walk through with others. We chose to make this report interactive to fight back against the vulture-like consumption of Blackness and poverty. Often, individuals find interest in the statistical data and the dark narratives of others but are complicit in their role of sustaining harmful systems. It is our hope that this report causes people to remove the blinders of privilege and elitism that have allowed systems to harm so many lives. It is a joint responsibility of those who choose social justice work and the community to ask in-depth and important questions about their place in the world, access, and personal agenda. We hope our work helps engage in this self-reflection and illuminates' steps forward in supporting system-impacted femmes of color, our communities, families, and lives.

In this report, you will find a roadmap including the phases of our research project, an explanation of the themes and stories that emerged from the data, recommendations for change, and reflections on what we learned throughout this process. This document is an embodied example of what investment in femme leadership looks like and what participatory knowledge feels like.

The title of the project is, 7 Generations of Bronx Femmes. The title is in reference to the worldview and philosophy from the indigenous communities of Turtle Island called "The seven generations principle."⁴ This principle reminds us that we walk with seven generations of ancestors behind us and the work we do in our lifetime impacts seven generations after us. We hope that within 7 generations from now, our girls will be free.

3. A term, coined by B. Cole of the Brown Boi Project, that recognizes the breadth and depth of identity for lesbian/queer/ womyn who tilt toward the masculine side of the gender scale.

4. Refer to the glossary for explanations of Turtle Island.



THIS REPORT IS PURPOSEFULLY INTERACTIVE. IN THE MARGINS, BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS, AND AT THE END OF THIS REPORT ARE RESOURCES, QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER, AND ACTIVITIES TO WALK THROUGH WITH OTHERS.

WE CHOSE TO MAKE THIS REPORT INTERACTIVE TO FIGHT BACK AGAINST THE VULTURE-LIKE CONSUMPTION OF BLACKNESS AND POVERTY.

IT IS OUR HOPE THAT THIS REPORT CAUSES PEOPLE TO REMOVE THE BLINDERS OF PRIVILEGE AND ELITISM THAT HAVE ALLOWED SYSTEMS TO HARM SO MANY LIVES.

IT IS A JOINT RESPONSIBILITY OF THOSE WHO CHOOSE SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK AND THE COMMUNITY TO ASK IN-DEPTH AND IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD, ACCESS, AND PERSONAL AGENDA.

WE HOPE OUR WORK HELPS ENGAGE IN THIS SELF-REFLECTION AND ILLUMINATES' STEPS FORWARD IN SUPPORTING SYSTEM-IMPACTED FEMMES OF COLOR, OUR COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, AND LIVES.



OUR PROJECT PATH

OUR METHODOLOGY

This report is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project about system-impacted young womyn of color in the Bronx, researched and written by system-impacted young femmes, inclusive of GNC/non-binary of color from the Bronx. Together, we carried out every phase of this research and collectively wrote every word of this report.

PAR is a research-based approach used by communities to survey, collect, and analyze data as a means of change, collaboration and creation of shared knowledge. PAR is deeply rooted in action and reflection. It looks to drastically shift unequal power dynamics within research and academia. Traditionally, research has been used as a tool of terror on marginalized communities of color. Traditional forms of research have, too often, created elitist and privileged structures which are inherently anti-Black, anti-land, anti-Indigenous, and have harmed communities of color. History holds examples of this; such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments (Brandt 1978), the harmful narratives of Black motherhood presented in the Moynihan Report (Moynihan 1969), the harsh material impacts of broken-windows theories of “disorder” (Stoudt et. al 2011), the well-documented atrocities on femme bodies in the form of testing birth control on poor, rural womyn in Puerto Rico,¹ and the ways Black womyn who were enslaved were experimented on and tortured in the name of science (Roberts 1999). Research can be a cloak under which harm and violence

1. Please see Resource Page, under websites for more information.

**WE WERE GUIDED
BY OUR DESIRE TO
KNOW MORE, TO
ENACT OUR VALUES OF
PARTICIPATION AND TO
CREATE INNOVATIVE
PROGRAMS, CONTENT,
AND IDEAS FROM OUR
RESEARCH**

hide. It can also be the walls constructed in order to privatize and monopolize knowledge. We see this in the exclusivity of higher education, the secrecy of data collected through surveillance, and the contentious battles around the ownership of biological matter.

PAR seeks to eradicate these paradigms in creating new forms of access and agency. PAR emphasizes collective inquiry and experimentation grounded in experience and social history. Knowledge, research, inquiry, and analysis can be and should be a public and transparent process. Research can and should be used as a tool to create change, to construct a better world, and to grow leadership. The participatory nature of PAR views all individuals as wise, and centers the expertise in the individuals that live and/or are connected to the issues they are investigating. Through this method of research, community members are able to gain agency, while accessing the necessary tools to support the struggles and triumphs of their neighborhood.

As a research team, we conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups to better understand the issues facing our community and to find solutions. We wanted to use what we learned through the research process to create programming, provide training and share backs with both community and government stakeholders. Through this project, we created space for girls to feel free, challenged, and understood. Our intention is to build this work out and spread our knowledge so that the gaps within the web of support, particularly for femmes of color, are closed and connections tightened.

Over the course of two years, the *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood* met, collaborated, and created an incubator of inquiry, curiosity, and investigation. Below, are the pieces of our path, delineated into four phases that were, in many ways, made by walking. We were guided by our desire to know more, to enact our values of participation and to create innovative programs, content, and ideas from our research.

PHASE 1: THE JOURNEY TO THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The first phase of our research was dedicated to learning. As a team, we dove into critically thinking and learning about the theories and issues of our work. We critically explored the history of the power dynamics created through research. We dissected the complex narratives we were told about gender. We equipped ourselves with language around gender norms, gender expectations, the spectrum of gender expression and how these all are inter-connected within issues of race, class, and privilege. We employed various levels of inquiry, moving through the numerous levels oppression: internal, interpersonal, institutional and ideological. We engaged in political education sessions, group readings, and intense, thoughtful discussions. We believe that the most robust research comes not just from knowing the answers, but rather, is born from learning and continually asking questions.

We did not disconnect our intellectual explorations from our emotional, somatic processing. As we explored the issues, we journaled, shared our personal experiences of being system-impacted, and set up regular healing circles open to other young femmes of color in the Bronx. Research, should not only be about unveiling pain and making it public, but should also include restoration, reflection, and community. We created this atmosphere of research by creating an iterative process where we were able to share what we learned with others, process it and expand our web of knowledge horizontally.

Towards the end of phase one, we created our research questions: “How are relationships between womyn and girls from the Bronx impacted through their system involvement? And how do their relationships with each other hinder or heal?”² In an effort to answer these questions, we explored all the different ways data is collected. We then used that information to identify and create multiple data collection tools. Collectively, we created a survey, interview questions and focus group topics.

“HOW ARE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WOMYN AND GIRLS FROM THE BRONX IMPACTED THROUGH THEIR SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT? AND HOW DO THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH EACH OTHER HINDER OR HEAL?”

2. We defined “system-impacted” as not just girls who have been arrested but also girls who have undocumented police contact or supporting someone who has been arrested.

PHASE 2: DATA COLLECTION

The second phase of this project was dedicated to data collection. We were intentional as to not reproduce harmful research protocols that can make participants feel like an experiment. Through each element of data collection, we centered our approach on co-creation, holistic relationship building, leadership development, and support. We viewed each opportunity to speak with young womyn as an opportunity to listen, to share resources, to hold open the doors to our programs, and ultimately, celebrate their knowledge, survival, and journey.

Through this phase we collaborated with a community-based girls healing circle program to provide once a month healing circles and we extended an invitation to attend to all the young womyn we made connections with. We each had a different but similar healing process. Some of us wrote in our journals, listened to music, took a self care day off from work or even reached out to our support systems for extra care. We made sure to check in with one another through texts, emails and face to face. We became a research team that was invested in each other and ourselves. We saw our well-being, holistic development, and emotional growth as important and equally transformative elements of our research. We were a team focused on surveys and self care, interviews and internal reflection, knowledge of the issue and knowledge of self.

91 SURVEYS
5 FOCUS GROUPS
4 INTERVIEWS
SECONDARY DATA
OBSERVATIONS
EXPERIENCED

SURVEYS.

The target survey population were self- identified womyn/femme of color that have had any form of contact with the legal system and be from and living in the Bronx. Participants were under the age of 25 and had prior juvenile legal involvement while under the age of 18. We then identified the areas in the Bronx where we could survey young womyn of color. We collected surveys through community canvassing and block parties. We spent a hot summer day at Orchard Beach in the Bronx, asking young womyn to take our survey. We worked with partner organizations, visited other alternative-to-incarceration programs in the Bronx, and spent afternoons at Bronx Family Court distributing and collecting surveys. We engaged neighbors, youth in our programs, and friends. We invited young womyn to CCFY and a neighborhood school for “survey days,” an afternoon for young womyn of color to meet each other, learn about CCFY programs, participate in community building activities, and take our survey.

Through all forms of gathering survey data, we believed it was critical to engage with young womyn as full people, not only as participants. This meant our interactions were not only checking off boxes; they often involved long conversations, anecdotes, and intentional listening. During this time, *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood* continued to have internal reflection. We wrote down our own memories that were triggered and unearthed through our interactions with young womyn/femmes. We reflected on our reactions to young womyn's experiences and documented the new things we were noticing in our ongoing community-based work.

In total, we collected 91 surveys. These surveys do not represent all young femmes of color in the Bronx, nor do the survey responses fully encompass all of the experiences of the womyn who have had contact with the legal system in the Bronx. These surveys responses are a sample. We believe that each story is important. We are not in competition with big data or the machinery of well-funded think tanks. What we offer instead is an alternative model of research, a participatory model of exploration, and data that is collected by the very people that are impacted by the issues. And through this, we know that our perspective is unique and critical.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS + FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to survey collection, we also conducted a small set of in-depth interviews and multiple focus groups. In total, we conducted 5 focus groups and 4 interviews. System impact for femmes reaches beyond arrest and detention but also includes prison and jail visits visits and undocumented encounters with law enforcement, and we wanted to capture that information. The interview and focus group questions focused on young womyn and their experiences, from their perspective. The questions highlighted how the system has impacted the participants relationships with other womyn in their lives.

The focus groups were purposed to capture womyn in relationship to each other. The focus groups were topic specific and the participants varied depending on topic. Our first focus group was for high school aged girls ages 13-18 and focused on their experiences within the school system. We asked about their ideas around alternatives to suspension and incarceration. Our participants for the second focus group were girls and young womyn ages 13-24, the topic of this focus group was community visioning. We shared scenarios and heard from our girls how they would respond and how the system responds to various community crises. We hoped to learn through these focus groups the girls and young womyn's idea and solutions for their

community. We wanted to highlight the community-based values, perspectives and alternatives to the current legal system. Our third focus group focused on transitioning to adulthood. This group was for girls and young womyn aged 18-24. This focus group explored the issues relevant to the of coming of age process for young womyn. We focused on this topic because, too often the transition to adulthood is based on gendered expectations of obedience (Jones 2009), rather than supportive passages into the next phase of growth. This is particularly important, when considering girls that are system impacted. Being system-impacted and under surveillance can make these transitions into womynhood high-stakes and punitive. For our last two focus groups we invited femme-identifying teens, mothers and grandmothers to cultivate an intergenerational space where we could explore the relationships womyn hold with each other. We believe that the thread of femme support usually runs through multiple generations of womyn, with grandmas as support systems, aunts as mentors, and even daughters as caretakers. We hoped to hear womyn speak about this with each other, across ages.

SECONDARY DATA

Throughout our data collection process, we continued to be active learners. We read and discussed other literature, reports, and academic scholarship related to system-impacted girls and young womyn, the legal system, femininity, and school-pushout. We also attended numerous conferences and learned from other organizations and agencies about this work. We wanted to recognize and read about the ongoing conversation about womyn in the legal system, and wanted to understand our work within this context.

LIVED EXPERIENCE/AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The final phase of our data collection involved our own lived experiences both professionally and personally. We used the ideas of autoethnography,³ we reflected on how these issues that we were exploring live in our work, our neighborhoods, and our lives. This too was information we learned from. Throughout the project, members of our team worked inside a youth detention facility in the South Bronx. Through their work, they engaged girls in activities around leadership, reflection, and connection. We worked inside of the detention facility, operated as facilitators to provide support for the girls when they returned home. We

3. a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings.

helped to ensure the girls that are currently incarcerated had community-based connections upon their return home and were aware of potential programs in the community. Through this process, *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood*, continued to have self-reflection. We wrote down what we saw inside the facilities, how we felt as femme people behind the thick concrete walls within the detention facility, and how these reflections impacted our role as researchers, and our own ideas around our research questions. Our process was continual, layered, and ongoing.



PHASE 3: ANALYZING THE DATA + STORY EMERGENCE



Our third phase of the project was, in some ways, the most intensive. After the data collection and analysis process, we identified the outstanding themes that surfaced.

For the survey data, we generated basic cross tabulations and statistics to understand the responses. We observed the patterns of response (what answers received the most response, which questions were most often not filled in at all). We noted what surprised us, what was unexpected, and what felt predictable.

As a research team, we listened to the focus group recordings and interviews. We then coded the interviews and pulled out direct quotes that went with the particular the themes. We discussed the recordings as a team to better understand the content, we discussed how the focus groups and interviews interacted with the surveys response; we analyzed whether they congruent, did they contradict, strengthen the hypothesis or cause the team to consider other alternatives. We also discussed observations during the visits to the detention facilitates that may not have surfaced during the focus groups and interviews. What talked about the moments that touched us the most, and the moments that made us feel the most raw. The analysis of data was not separate from our emotions, ideas, rather, we let our own ideas, positionalities, and identities be our guides.

PHASE 4: SHARE-BACK AND ACTION

Early in the research process, we asked ourselves, What information do you want to be able to explain to your Grandma at the end of this? Our response was; we want to articulate to our Grandmothers the barriers we face as young womyn, to disrupt the idea that we are just bad kids, to communicate the need to move away from blaming and punishing individual young people, to be able to explain the concept and complexity of gender; and to show our elders, what Bronx culture is. As the PAR team, one of the guiding principles throughout each phase of the research project, was, to be true to ourselves. We understood very early in this process, that, being able to explain those truths to our Grandmothers would be our truth. This project, for us was a reflexive inquiry rooted in acknowledging where we come from and the responsibility of sharing that knowledge.

The fourth and final phase is continuing iterative process. We have shared the preliminary findings with some of our community and system partners. We have presented the finding at conferences, had informal conversations about the findings with peers, and shared the information with young womyn involved in our collective of programs. The findings of this report are not complete- but are continuing to unfold, we view this process as the afterlives of the research. The share-back, we believe is the embodiment and spirit of PAR. The share-back illustrates the idea of what can grows from the collective, open, creative processes of inquiry.

The share-back has been divided into three main sections:

1. Trainings
2. Urban Girl Magic
3. The Writher's Project

TRAININGS

Using the preliminary research findings, *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood* Team developed a content-specific training for system-stakeholders, community members, community leaders, and academics. The trainings were in part, created using the findings from the project and were developed as a opportunities to critically

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- 2. URBAN GIRL MAGIC**
- 3. THE WRITHER'S PROJECT**

THE TRAININGS WERE IN PART, CREATED USING THE FINDINGS FROM THE PROJECT AND WERE DEVELOPED AS A OPPORTUNITIES TO CRITICALLY THINK ABOUT HOW THE EXPERIENCES OF SYSTEM-IMPACTED YOUNG WOMYN/FEMMES ARE FREQUENTLY LEFT OUT OF THE CONVERSATIONS ON SOLUTIONS, ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION, AND PROGRAMS WITHIN THE LEGAL SYSTEM.

think about how the experiences of system-impacted young womyn/femmes are frequently left out of the conversations on solutions, alternatives to incarceration, and programs within the legal system. The system-related services and programs often reproduce social norms of masculinity, assumptions of male-centric experiences, and do not work to undo toxic masculinity. The trainings created through this project explore these ideas and address these issue.

URBAN GIRL MAGIC

Urban Girl Magic is a program created and directed by two members from *G.I.R.L.S 'N Da Hood*. Inspired by the findings of the research, this program brings together girls from all over the Bronx for a femme-centered space of leadership, celebration, and community capacity building. Young womyn in the program are able to create dance moves, cook, discuss issues affecting their life, and engage in activities that shine light and uplift their value, creativity, self-expression, and girlhood.

THE WRITHER'S PROJECT

Inspired by the findings from our research, the Writther's Project is a femme of color writing and performance collective. It is a project that created artistic prompts derived from our research, and asked participants to respond to them, engaging in an additional layer of our work. A composting of the findings and a fertilization of new ideas, the content generated from this immerse writing experience was used to create a performance piece illustrating the themes of our research. It is a choreo-poem expressing the work, using words of young femmes, created and crafted by system-impacted femmes.





RESEARCH THEMES + FINDINGS

Engaging in our data was a profound experience.

Pouring through the layers of experiences illustrated through the interviews, surveys, and focus groups created space for us to identify many details, issues and challenges that the young womyn shared. In our analysis, we found four themes emerged:

- Importance of an Intergenerational, Gendered Trauma Lens
- Relationships Matter
- The Weight of Gendered Expectations and Emotional Labor
- Intersecting Issues: Homelessness & Domestic Violence

Below, we share these themes, illuminating the voices, compelling perspectives and realities of womyn and femmes with experiences of contact with the injustice system.

INTERACTIVE QUESTION

**IF YOU COULD THINK OF
7 GENERATIONS AHEAD,
WHAT WOULD WISH
FOR THEM?**

IMPORTANCE OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL, GENDERED TRAUMA LENS.

Trauma is what remains after a painful experience. In the conversations we had with the young womyn, we found that trauma involved more than just individual experiences but included generational impact and future decision-making. We know that we can trace generational trauma back centuries through subjugation of Black and Brown bodies and distrust of institutions that have failed our communities for just as long. For our research, we examined a somewhat narrower scope. We defined generational trauma as a painful event or emotion(s) that has been passed down from our mothers to daughters for generations. This theme emerged as soon as we realized that 62% of girls surveyed shared that their mother had been arrested. Of the participants surveyed, 70% shared that they have had a womyn family member (blood or chosen) who has been arrested. We did not anticipate that system-contact would be so multi-generational, this realization caused us to consider what the intergenerational impacts of this looks and feels like.

What happens to mothers, impacts their children. Through this analysis we also concluded that children observe and learn behaviors by watching their parents. Many of the participants simultaneously recognized that their mothers' provide constant support, while also realizing that their mothers' actions and involvement with the legal system continued cycles of legal system contact. Many of the participants usually met this realization with empathy; they articulated how system involved also included the systemic effects of, substance addiction, intimate partner violence and how the structural oppressive systems of racism, classism, and sexism that, in part enabled these realities for them and their families. Participants noted, that their mothers and grandmothers were often working through their own trauma, sometimes in harmful ways. Daughters saw this process, were impacted by it, but perhaps most importantly, were understanding, empathetic, and desiring restoration for their

families. We viewed this empathy as a counter to generational trauma—a healing salve that looks to repair rather than punish. As one young womyn avowed, “She (mom) still needs to work on her, like work on the inside. Even before I was born, she needed to work on herself,” (CCFY, 20 years old, Soundview).

One mother shared:

“I understand the pain that my mom went through, so she wasn’t able to give me what I needed. And giving me the instruction that she did give me caused me GREAT pain...as time went on, God began to show me my mother’s pain, and the stuff she went through and she couldn’t deal with my pain and didn’t know how to treat me because it has happened to her... I am convinced that there is not a mother out here that has turned their back on their child that does not go through a constant torture, mental torture of them herself.”

—CCFY, 51 years old, Morrisania

For this participant, becoming a mother helped her better understand her own trauma and choices. She shared:

“It caused me to hurt my son because of [how] my mother hurt me. I didn’t know what to do when I had my son. [Do] I do to him like what I was taught to do? Ok. Fine. And I wind up hurting my baby. And I had to come to the realization that this is just a generational curse that has to be broken. It’s not gonna continue. I’ve got to stop this cycle.”

—CCFY, 51 years old, Morrisania

These quotations illustrate how the empathy many of the participants had for their mothers allowed them to understand their own trauma. The latter felt like her mother wasn’t there for her or did not know how to intervene because she went through the same thing. The mother quoted above, realized that because her mother never received help, she did not know how to help her child, when she became a mother, and this was resulting in what seemed to be an ongoing cycle. This mother’s self-knowledge of the generational implications of her unresolved pain seemed to have led to profound determination to address her own behaviors and change. She chose to focus on the why behind her behavior,

so as not to continue a cycle. Interrupting violence for this mother came through recognizing where the behavior came from.

It is important, that within an intergenerational gendered trauma lens to understand and combat the erasure of young womyn's challenges and struggles. Typically, when we think of the traumas femmes of color face, our imaginations bring us to rape and issues of domestic violence. However, the more in-depth, nuanced layers are often rendered invisible, especially when involving state sanctioned violence. A frame of reference exists for the normative trauma lens of gender (ie: rape, sexual assault, etc.), but those that fall outside of the norm are largely rendered invisible, including contact with the legal system. One of the participants discussed her experiences after becoming pregnant. She said she was kicked out of her home because of her pregnancy, and had to find a way to survive, she stated that she "did things she didn't want to do." (CCFY, 29 years old, Morrisania). This exemplifies the consequences of erasing young womyn's system related trauma from public discourse. What resources were available to that young womyn? Where is the empathy for her situation?

INTERACTIVE QUESTION

WHAT RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND/OR SKILL SETS DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION OFFER FOR YOUNG FEMMES IN THIS CASE? IF NONE, HOW CAN YOUR ORGANIZATION CULTIVATE THEM? IF YES, HOW CAN THOSE RESOURCES BE IMPLEMENTED EFFECTIVELY?

The experiences of young womyn/femmes/GNC/and non-binary young people that have had contact with the legal system are not as well documented or understood as their male counterparts. This has led to interventions and responses that are not created to respond with this population in mind.

We also learned that the feeling of erasure also affects interpersonal relationships. Through talking to the young womyn, we found that some were made to feel invisible by people in their lives, many of whom had been implicated in the same types of struggles and violence. One recalled:

"My mother was touched as a child by her uncle, I know that's messed up... she didn't tell her mother. When her boyfriend started touching me at 13, I told her. She let it happen for 4 years and said he is just being nice. I can never be at peace cause of that. Cause she knew that and she let it happen."

—CCFY, 19 years old, Whitlock

The response of this participant's mother of this participant's mother was likely based on her own experiences, yet, it may have caused the young womyn to feel invisible and isolated. This young womyn responded differently than her mother did to abuse, she chose not to keep it a secret- she told her mother. She spoke her truth aloud and asserted her own value and power to advocate for herself- this is a powerful form of self-actualization and self-

healing. This young womyn will have other forms of healing to do because of this abuse, and her mother's response, but her ability to speak up- is a step.

During a workshop at the detention center, one of our girls said that she struggled with her relationship with her mother and father. Her father, she said has been incarcerated since her birth and her mother has used drugs intermittently. She felt like her system contact came from not having a stable relationship with her parents. She said that the strain in the relationship between her and her parents led her to make some negative choices. The young womyn also said that she made difficult choices out of necessity and drew a striking connection between her own decision-making and the replication of her parents' behavior that made her vulnerable to system contact.

By using an intergenerational gendered trauma lens, it increases the capacity to establish and understand options for healing-related support structures for femmes that might not otherwise be recognized, such as intergenerational conversations, elder engagement, family-based support, and culturally-relevant spiritual practices. These type of support services are currently lacking in our communities. Many of the young womyn interviewed and focus grouped shared non-traditional ways to heal from their trauma. They talked about hugs from their mothers and other mothers that helped build intimacy and relationship. Other participants talked about ideas that have a wider reach, as evidenced here:

“I would do what you guys do – like go to schools and target areas that have like violence things and stuff like that. A positive area for students where they feel they can come and talk to somebody or if they have a problem they can come to someone they trust.”

—CCFY, 17 years old, White Plains Road

Generational trauma is evidence that there is a lot more at play than individuals mistreating each other. The blame is not only on grandmothers, mothers, and daughters for continuing cycles of system contact, but include the institutional realities that have a significant role in modern societal conditions. However, by identifying the generational dimensions of trauma and violence we are able to establish the need for shifts in existing system structures. Healing must be in the community through institutional changes, and it must include transformations in relationships.



RELATIONSHIPS MATTER.

It may seem obvious, especially after discussing the significance of generational trauma, however, we found through the analysis of the research collected, that relationships often were the difference between becoming system involved and remaining out of the system for many young womyn. The bonds between womyn were also impactful in understanding how deeply entrenched the young womyn became in the system. Time and time again in conversations with our girls, they referenced how specific relationships impacted their system involvement and how those connections helped them understand their relationship to the legal system.

Many of the participants stated that the lack of support from their familial relationships contributed to some of their choices, some of which led them into the legal system. One young womyn stated:

“We [siblings] all had different fathers, mine was the only one who stayed around, so she [mom] would always say I don’t need to take care of you because you got a father...my sister moved with my aunt the whole time I was in middle school and that’s when I needed her the most.”

—CCFY, 19 years old, Whitlock Ave

This scenario illustrates how the feeling of being overlooked played a role in the decisions that ultimately lead to contact with the legal system.

Alternatively, young womyn also expressed that womyn have supported them throughout their involvement with the legal system. Of the young womyn surveyed, 26% reported that their social workers, case workers, and therapists were womyn. Of the young womyn surveyed, 60% said a womyn mentor came to pick them up from the precinct. Some of the participants indicated that their positive female relationships were familial. One participant affirmed, “My grandma, my mom...the womyn in my family, played a positive part in the decisions I make,” (CCFY, 25 years old, South Bronx). Participants also stated that some of their supportive relationships were in their schools and communities.

Womyn often showed up during critical life moments, for many of the participants. One girl said, “ My high school dean was my only support in a school where the rest of the staff wanted me out,” (CCFY, 19 years old, Yankee Stadium). A young woman shared in an interview, “There was this woman, she is my son’s godmother now, but when I was locked up, she would take me out on my visiting when I had a pass and talk to me and try to support me any way possible,” (CCFY, 20 years old, Grand Concourse). These relationships helped the young womyn feel seen and heard, gave them a context to consider their lives differently. We must continue to invest and uplift the supportive, healthy, transformative and accessible relationships that young womyn have in their lives.

Another aspect of relationships we encountered were the consequences of state monitoring and interference interrupting important familial bonds. Many arrests resulted from in-home violence with a family member and these relationships contributed to the involvement in the system. The families contact law enforcement when conflict arises because that is what they are told to do. Not many resources outside of law enforcement are provided and while conducting intake in a detention center, one of our researchers spoke to a pair of sisters. As she recalled:

“The reason they were arrested was for fighting over a video game at home. One sister had to get a staple and stitches on her face. As I spoke to them about the situation, they ended up laughing about what transpired and said it was really dumb. I thought about how instead of calling the police, a community member could have been brought in and saved these girls the trip through the system. Nothing amazes [me more] than how fucked up this system turns out to be every day.”

Journalled ethnographic reflection from researcher

As the participant discussed the scenario of her sister she laughed. However, as the situation may now be laughable, there were many more options outside of legal system involvement to handle a sibling fight. Other options may have been to call others to come help calm the situation or call on someone that has skills in conflict resolution. Either choice would have been a better option.

Most often the primary relationships young womyn have are with their parents. However, parents are often not offered programming and resources to support girls who are system-



impacted. Through our ethnographic observations, professional expertise, and in particular our intergenerational focus group, we found that once given the opportunity to participate in more family engagement, there were examples of a positive and influential shift in relationships and dynamics. One of the young womyn participants said that her relationship with her mother began to disintegrate when they had an argument that ended with her mother calling law enforcement. Ultimately, because of that exchange the young womyn spent time in a youth detention center. This created a rift in their relationship, and the young womyn said, she felt that she could no longer trust her mother. The participant was given the opportunity to participate in an alternative to incarceration program within her community. Along with attending the program, her mother joined an associated family engagement program where she was able to learn different parenting skills and ways to handle conflict with her daughter. Shortly after the participant and her mother both began their respective programs, the participant shared that her relationship with her mother improved (CCFY, 18 years old, Mott Haven).



Positive relationships between womyn within a community can create a positive shift of dynamics inside and outside of the home. These relationships have the power to disrupt negative patterns and violence. One researcher expressed, “womyn in my life, never threw me away” (CCFY, 25 years old, Millbrook). This statement is powerful, as all womyn and girls should never feel as if they have been thrown away. If womyn, girls, femmes, aunts, mothers and grandmothers were provided resources that assist in their healing process and helped them move through the trauma of their experiences, the outcomes for womyn generations to come would have space for transformational growth.

According to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, “alternatives to incarceration programs are designed to reduce reliance on incarceration and operates in safe spaces.”¹ Often, in some alternative to incarceration programs, girls and young womyn are able to connect with credible messengers from the community that help them focus on their strengths and assets, engage in one-on-one mentoring, and participate in weekly sessions with their peers. In these weekly sessions, the program participants learn different skills around leadership, conflict resolution and “know your rights” around interactions with law enforcement. One program participant said, “When I learned how to communicate with womyn, my relationships got better,” (CCFY, 23 years old, Prospect Ave). It is significant therefore, to address that while these types of programs and others doing healing and rebuilding work with individuals with system contact are holding the system accountable. Freedom is also the opportunity to have

1. https://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/opca/ati_description.htm

a context, community, and social systems that support thriving, interpersonal relationships.

Often, however, many alternative- to-incarceration programs are not offered to young womyn of color. From our observations and conversations with research participants, we found that those who attended alternative- to-incarceration programs were often the only girl, and most often the only girl of color in the program. Some of the participants spoke about the pressure and attention they received because they were racially different than most participants, some participants said they felt as if their program was a “unsafe environment.”

Some participants noted that, being the only girl in the room oftentimes led girls to feel the pressure to fulfill stereotypical roles rather than having the space to explore who they are. Because of this dynamic, within many alternative- to-incarceration programs, some girls felt forced to be more aggressive, others felt that they were being looked at to nurture others. Based on the experience of the PAR team, and responses from participants, many alternative to incarceration programs were primarily designed for young men.² Although, many of these programs have render positive results for the primarily male participants, policies and practice have not adjusted to include a gendered lens to be inclusive of young femmes. One young womyn shared, that as a participant in an alternative -to incarceration program, she felt like she would have benefited by being with other girls that understood what she was going through. She said, there were certain things that she wasn’t able to talk about because she felt the boys would not understand (CCFY, 16 years old, White Plains Road).

We found that alternative to incarceration programs that prioritized relationship building could be transformative in the lives of girls and womyn with system contact.

**POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN WOMYN WITHIN
A COMMUNITY CAN
CREATE A POSITIVE SHIFT
OF DYNAMICS INSIDE AND
OUTSIDE OF THE HOME**

2. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/evidence/Arches_Final_2018.pdf

THE WEIGHT OF GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND EMOTIONAL LABOR.

The traditional roles womyn and femmes have been asked to play in their families and community, have created an un-do weight of expectations for them. This was apparent throughout the focus groups and interviews the PAR team conducted. Often, the participants said that they assume caretaking roles in their homes; looking after themselves, their siblings, and in some instances, even their parents. As one of our elder femmes revealed:

“When I was coming up, like you said, womyn had to do everything. We had to clean, cook for your brother, we had to always take care of the house. My mother use to always have this saying if you learn now you won’t have to be taught later and then you’ll know how to take care of your husband this and that. Womyn always had to be the one to do (everything).”

—CCFY, 69 years old, Mott Haven

As a young womyn, she was expected to learn how to maintain the functions of the household as a skill to help her in the future. Some interrogated why this burden fell on their shoulders, with one reflecting, “My brother was older than me, why am I cleaning with my sister and he’s not?” (CCFY, 19 years old, Whitlock Ave). While another participant reflected “[My mother] would say, ‘I don’t care what your brothers do and don’t do, you’re my daughter.’” (CCFY, 29 years old, Yankee Stadium). These quotes really bring home the notion that gender roles/ expectations affect us all. Gender expectations have continuously been a detrimental issue in many of our communities, forcing femmes to overextend themselves for those in their lives.

While we learned that the young womyn were held to different expectations around household tasks and fulfilling basic need one of the most damaging outcomes from gendered expectations is the increased emotional labor for girls. *G.I.R.L.S* defines emotional labor as, the unaccounted and unrecognized time and energy placed in supporting those we love and care for.

Despite their own needs, many of the participants shared that they provide emotional support to others, even when they are in need of support. In one focus group a young womyn shared, “You can’t give up, being that role model and that leader and even while going through my pain and my struggle, still being that ear to listen,” (CCFY, 29 years old, Yankee Stadium). Many of the participants stated that they were asked to grow up at a faster pace than their male peers, one young womyn said, “At the age of 9, I had to give up my Barbie dolls to take care of my niece,” (CCFY, 20 years old, South Bronx). The increased emotional labor can result in girls feeling isolated and unsupported, leading to early adultification of youth regardless of their age (Jones 2009). In a focus group, one girl emphasized:

“At a very young age, I was taking care of my younger siblings. My brother who is 2 years younger than me, he got into a lot of trouble. Emotionally it took a toll. I never realized how much it hurt me... just being there and having to pick up his slack...when he got shot, having to deal with that a very young age is hard.”

—CCFY, 22 years old, Prospect Ave

Girls felt like they had to take on more responsibility because they were the older sibling or the only girl in the household. These responsibilities sometimes made them feel forgotten about, and as a result, often more overwhelmed. Having adult responsibilities shifted perceptions of these girls to the outside world. Adultification meant, for many of the participants that they were being treated as mature womyn by members of their family and community, law enforcement and arbiters of the criminal justice system. This can look like young womyn serving as translators between law enforcement and families, teenagers who were arrested without parental notification, and/ or increased expectations for mandated programs post-detention. The adultification of young womyn has very real and material consequences. Statistics and other research illustrates that young womyn of color experience harsher sentences in the legal system than their white counterparts (Morris 2016) and that oftentimes, specifically Black womyn, are perceived as older, more aggressive, and thus more “deserving” of punishment (Ocen 2013).

INTERACTIVE QUESTION

WHAT TYPES OF EMOTIONAL LABOR CAN YOU NAME? WHAT ARE THE MESSAGES ABOUT GENDERED EMOTIONAL LABOR IN OUR SOCIETY?

(CONSIDER THE IMAGES FROM MEDIA, MUSIC, MOVIES, OUR FAMILIES, LAWS, SCHOOLS, ETC.)

GENDER NORMS AND THE EXPECTATIONS OF WOMYN AS FAMILIAL CARETAKERS IS NOT A NEW CONCEPT. IT WAS CLEAR, DURING MANY OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH THE PARTICIPANTS, THAT MANY GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMYN CONTINUE TO FEEL THIS PRESSURE AS THEY MATURE AND THAT THE EMOTIONAL LABOR TRANSFERRED FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.

While we see and understand how adultification impacts young womyn's experiences in the legal system, it is also important to note that "adult" expectations carry over and operate within homes and communities. Young womyn described the pressures they felt holding their responsibilities and matured roles – the pressure to upkeep stasis at home, of not being recognized for their efforts, of being held to a different standard, many times putting their own needs and aspirations on hold. Emotional labor is unpaid labor and the consequences of performing this labor came at a variety of costs and mixed results. As one girl recalled:

"My mom left when I was young, and it was just me and my grandma for a long time. When she (Mom) came back I was happy, you know yeah. My mom back and everything and now she is putting all this pressure on me. I have 4 other siblings in my house and everything is on me, everything is on my back. So I can't not go finish school, cannot go to college, I can't have fun, cause I have kids that's looking up to me as an older sister."

—CCFY, 18 years old, Mott Haven

Girls and young womyn being asked to adhere to gender norms around familial caretaking among the participants was not uncommon, one participant said, "In my eyes, I've been grown, since I was about 15." (CCFY, 19 years old, Yankee Stadium). Gender norms and the expectations of womyn as familial caretakers is not a new concept. It was clear, during many of the interviews with the participants, that many girls and young womyn continue to feel this pressure as they mature and that the emotional labor transferred from generation to generation. One participant shared, that growing up, she watched her grandmother support her uncle while he was incarcerated and after many years, when her Grandma could no longer support him, her mother stepped in to do it. And then, when her mother felt overstretched and frustrated, the participant took the responsibility of supporting her uncle. The participant also shared that supporting her uncle became a strain in her life, it was a source of anxiety, guilt, and pressure to be the only person supporting him. The participant said that supporting her uncle was "too difficult," she said that she has to provide financial and emotional support while also working and going to school. She said:

“It is so complicated. I love my family so much and want to be there for them... supporting my uncle was also, in some ways, supporting my mom and Grandma, but no one checked in on me, no one asked if I felt okay or if I needed support. I felt invisible and the pressure on my shoulders felt so heavy but that felt invisible too.”

—CCFY, 29 years old, Co-op City

The emotional labor of supporting those incarcerated extended across generations. Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and other womyn support those incarcerated by; sending letters, sending packages, visiting the incarcerated family, putting money on books, attending court dates and advocating for the freedom of those they love. For many, particularly mothers, this causes a financial strain and amplifies the emotional weight.¹ One participant stated, “I didn’t get paid to make sure he had money in his commissary. I didn’t get paid to go visit him. These are all things I was doing out of my emotions because this was someone I was loving.” (CCFY, 25 years old, Simpson Street). Many participants echoed this sentiment, supporting individuals that are incarcerated places a financial and emotional toll, particularly on womyn. Often, supporting their incarcerated loved ones, who are often men, compromised their ability to keep a job, and earn a living.

As aforementioned, the majority of support that young womyn receive during their system experience came from other womyn in their families and lives. According to the Ella Baker Center study, 63% of prisoners made family members primarily responsible for, “court-related costs associated with conviction.” These costs included legal fees, collect calls and medical expenses. According the same study, 83% of those family members were womyn.²

Most of the womyn focus grouped were aware of how emotional labor and gender expectations land on them as womyn differently than it does on men, and they expressed their desire for equity. During the intergenerational focus group, one participant stated, “Stuff happens and it’s like overlooked when it’s boys but when it’s girls, like you paste it on a billboard,” (CCFY, 51 years old, Morrisania). The double standard and heightened visibility of young womyn’s actions, when not perfectly aligned with the expectation’s society holds for them are often held to a different standard than young men. Young men and young womyn can



1. See Essie Justice Group Report for more information on these issue. “Because She’s Powerful.” 2018.
2. Ella Baker Center Report. “Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families.” September 2015.

behave in similar ways, however, because of societal norms, womyn are often vilified for their actions, and boys and young men are not. With this awareness of disparity comes a desire to see their emotional gifts be celebrated and recognized. The participant later eloquently and powerfully asserted, “There’s more to us than just our body,” (CCFY, 51 years old, Morrisania).



INTERSECTING ISSUES: HOMELESSNESS, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE + IMMIGRATION STATUS

While conducting our research, we knew that it would be important to create a greater context to understand the intersecting issues at play relating to one's system contact. There are numerous issues that impact girls and womyn, all of which need attention and support. While we may not see these as directly related to system contact, we believe that when people and communities struggle, this puts people more at risk for being caught up in the legal system. During our survey intake, we asked girls what they felt were some of the issues that hurt the womyn in their communities and 71% referenced homelessness as a major issue. For the purposes of this report, homelessness is defined as not having a permanent home and living on the street or shelter. Through both the interviews and focus groups we gained insight into the participants' experiences with homelessness. The participants shared their stories that provide us better understanding about the ways housing impacts womyn- and how those impacts pushed them closer to the margins of society and therefore also pushed toward legal system contact. Vulnerable and inconsistent housing situations continued and prolonged involvement in the legal system. One femme shared her frustrations of having to share her clothes and resources with a friend, just so she would have somewhere to stay, (CCFY, 19 years old, Jackson Ave). For some of the girls interviewed, their time incarcerated was extended because they did not have a parent or guardian to pick them up from the detention facility or because they did not have permanent housing. We also heard from girls that said they were considered "low-risk," (were not involved in "serious" incidents and/or were not booked) however, they were required to spend the night in detention facilities when they otherwise may not have had to, only because they did not have a home or safe place to return to.

In addition to homelessness, young womyn expressed other issues that impacted them such as domestic and intimate partner

violence. Elevating these are important because we believe that recognizing the violence and the challenges that girls face can be a way to prevent “at risk” avenues towards the system. We also should be fully aware of the context that girls are going home to once they are released. Survey results indicated that 82% of girls viewed domestic violence as an issue in their community. For the purposes of this report, we defined domestic violence as, violent behavior between two or more people in the home. Many of the girls that took part in this research project, discussed physical violence between intimate partners in the home, between mothers and daughters and between siblings. The participants said that physical violence, theft, and destruction of property were among the actions that lead to their system involvement.

Immigrations status was also a topic that was surfaced during the interviews and focus groups. One participant said she was dependent on her younger sister for support after getting pregnant. She bounced from house to house and did not have access to the proper resources because she was not a U.S. Citizen, (CCFY, 18 years old, Gunhill Road).

Taking a broader look at the challenges womyn and girls face helps us understand that system-contact is not an isolated incident or a one-dimensional occurrence of “bad behavior.” There is a multitude of barriers and inequities that young womyn face, and if we do not employ a gender lens—an investment in understanding the lives of system-impacted womyn from our perspective—then we invisibilize and ignore many critical, important issues.



CONCLUSIVE THOUGHTS ABOUT THE THEMES

We took on this participatory action research project to learn more about our community and unearth the truths and experiences of womyn and femmes that have had contact with the legal system system. Our four major themes all came back to one conclusion: gender matters. Period. Too often the voices of womyn and femmes are eliminated from the conversation and reforms about mass incarceration, Because of this, the needs of womyn and femmes are neglected and ignored. To uncover the experiences of womyn and femmes across generations we spoke with womyn and femmes of different ages, from different generations, that had similar and different experiences. From those conversations and interactions, it was clear, how structural challenges have created a system with cyclical implications.

We also spent time to understand how relationship was a pivotal aspect of the experiences of womyn and femmes. We began to understand motivations and behaviors, and illuminate empowering stories of resilience, togetherness, empathy, and growth. Throughout this project, we also dissected the concept of emotional labor and its consequences. We came to understand the skill and strength it takes to perform emotional labor, we aimed to take the emotional labor out of the shadows, and recognize its value in providing a foundational thread through relationships and families. And, finally, by exposing other significant issues like housing challenges and domestic violence, we establish the necessity for a broader, holistic conversation when examining the unique experiences of womyn with that have had contact with the legal system.

A memorable quote from a young woman in one of our focus groups addresses the isolation and adaptation that can come with system contact. She said:

In middle school is when I started to see, not everybody has good intentions for you. People are backstabbing and stuff like that. Like...I couldn't trust people. I would tell people what I was going through and they'd put me through it more. They would go and like tell people so it was hard for me to trust people and stuff. I even



reached out to my sister before and tell her what I was going through, she was basically like you're Black we don't do that, that's weird. So then I just started close people off and now when I'm going through things like I got this I'm gonna get through this on my own. I don't need nobody. In sociology I learned that you need to belong. Everyone has that sense of belonging. You always need someone, so yea..."

—CCFY, 19 years old, Whitlock Ave.

With this project, we had the unique and humbling opportunity to connect with so many womyn and femmes in our community. We gave them space, and they shared their truth. We assert the need for their stories to be told, despite challenges, setbacks, and a society that has not traditionally recognized the need to carve out special space intended specifically for them. We hoped with this project to ease that isolation and provide a space to belong.



**OUR FOUR MAJOR
THEMES ALL CAME
BACK TO ONE
CONCLUSION:
GENDER MATTERS.
PERIOD.**



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE + VISIONS FORWARD

These recommendations, are an opportunity to, as a community think anew.

We asked ourselves while creating these recommendations; what can a refreshed, renewed world look like that honors, respects, and values womyn, femmes and girls of color? We have learned in this work that the greatest form of resistance is our imagination. Being able to see beyond the issues we face and hope for a brighter and better tomorrow. This imagination has birthed recommendations that when approached with care and intention, can be accomplished. This idea of a sustainable and more just future is rooted in the truth of possibility, our research and data, and self reflection.

Below are a list of recommendations. Under each recommendation is a call to action. Let these recommendations be some of the seeds we water to cultivate the change we know is possible.

INTERACTIVE QUESTION

WHAT WOULD SHIFT IF SYSTEM-IMPACTED YOUNG WOMYN INTERACTED MOSTLY WITH FEMME SYSTEM WORKERS? REFLECT ON WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INCREASING FEMME REPRESENTATION WITHIN SYSTEM EMPLOYMENT AND LEADERSHIP?

TRANSFORMING PROGRAMS: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

“WE NEED MORE RESOURCES, SO WE CAN SEND MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS ON RETREATS,”

—CCFY, 25 YEARS OLD, SIMPSON ST

Organizations need to be conscious of representation within their programs. Diverse representation is a critical factor for participants as well as program staff. Inviting young womyn and femmes into pre-existing programs is the gateway to inclusion practices, but nowhere near a final destination. Girls shared how uncomfortable it felt to be the only girl in the room and how stigmatizing it felt to be in programs that were designed for girls. Girl-specific programming often perpetuated gender stereotypes. Programs need to create a safe spaces for girls that include intentionality around language as well as opportunities for youth leadership. Programs need to encourage youth leadership in diverse, holistic ways, and not programs that only provide male-centered examples of leadership. Exploring and promoting leadership as a spectrum of values (i.e. critical thinking, emotional intelligence, creativity, ethics). Promoting girl centered leadership works to dissolve the narrow boxes of success that girls often do not fit into, and, are often told not to do. Womyn leaders can and should, take up space, be loud and confident, and display their full selves. Young womyn deserve positive youth development programs where they feel they belong and where they are welcomed to contribute.

Programs that support youth need to also offer family engagement and family support. The legal system is isolating for individuals and their families and space for families to feel recognized, heard, and connected are needed. System-contact is multi-generational inclusive of; womyn; mothers, aunts, and other femme family member, as they are often simultaneously supporting young people, while also holding the identity of being system impacted. The weight of this can feel heavy for womyn and girls who tend to have more familial responsibilities. Engaging family members across all of these issues is critical.

“SOMETIMES THE PEOPLE YOU DON’T KNOW WILL HELP YOU AND GIVE YOU MORE INFORMATION AND MORE SUPPORT THAN YOU WOULD GET FROM LIKE YOUR SISTER AND THEN YOU WOULDN’T HAVE TO BE WORRIED OR TO WONDER AM I GONNA MAKE IT, SHOULD I DO IT THIS WAY, CUZ WHEN YOU HAVE A LOT ON YOUR MIND, IT CAUSES HEALTH PROBLEMS. WHEN YOU STRESS OUT IT CAUSE HEALTH PROBLEMS. SO BEING ABLE TO GET IT OFF YOUR CHEST OR BE ABLE TO RELATE TO PEOPLE THAT’S GONNA LISTEN AND NOT JUST SAY OH YEA OK AND THEN JUST TELL YOU THEIR PROBLEM. A LOT OF PEOPLE PUT YOU OFF SO YOU CAN HEAR WHAT THEY GOING THRU. AT THIS POINT IN TIME, YOU NEED TO BE LISTENED TO. THIS IS VERY HELPFUL TO ME!”

—CCFY, 69 YEARS OLD, MOTT HAVEN

Often, familiar support is not programmatic, it often looks like parents supporting each other through crisis and court appointments, accompanying each other to school enrollment offices and health appointments, checking in on each other over the phone or as they pass each other in visiting lines. As families are often meeting the needs of each other, it is critical that programs are built to understand this communal dynamic and work to it and enhance support service . This can look like creating more, opportunities for parents to engage with their children within various workshops, creative spaces, and supportive networks. Programs and the community should empower families to not only take care of their own but to advocate for the advancement of their collective community. This is important, powerful, healing. As programs support families they are also supporting the young womyn that are a part of them.

Mothers and grandmothers should be included in workshops, symposiums, and other forms of programming. heir input and voice will propel us forward. All generations should be able to work and commune together in order to build a more just society.

CALL TO ACTION FOR TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMS

MORE HEALING-CENTERED EXPERIENCES FOR GIRLS AND THEIR MOTHER FIGURES.

Expanding opportunities for girls and mothers, grandmothers, and other femme figures to engage in activities that focus on self awareness and self expression. This moves us into creating and sustaining healing experiences. Healing experiences provide the time to think creatively not only about how to express ourselves but also about how to identify solutions. In this project, we are defining healing as the the process of redefining and repurposing our pain. It is a lifelong, ongoing process.

SUPPORTING GIRLS NEEDS TO RADICALLY INCLUDE SUPPORTING THEIR MOTHERS AND OTHER PARENT FIGURES.

This support should include court advocacy, family strengthening programs, and holding space for intergenerational womyn to create together.

CREDIBLE MESSENGER MENTORS FOR OUR GIRLS.

Credible Messenger Mentors should understand their own personal development, healing, and have outlets to express themselves. They should be able to articulate those skills to their mentees. Individuals who have walked in similar experiences with girls not only are able to support in the moment, but also are able to model leadership. Most girls who are supported by a mentor have desires to step into similar leadership roles and mentor other girls. As we see the celebration of formerly incarcerated men take on leadership positions in system reform and youth support, we also need the same type of modeling, upliftment, and acknowledgment of formerly incarcerated and system-impacted womyn that work as frontline interventionists, supports, mentors, and leaders in creating solutions.

COMPONENTS OF A SAFE SPACE.

Communication is a large part of creating a safe space for girls. As an example, referring to a womyn as “female” is derogatory and demeaning. This and often similar, colloquial terms should be discussed and excluded from all spaces, particularly girl serving spaces. Programs should engage girls in open dialogue that go beyond the limitations of gender, sexual identity and stereotypes. Programs should allow femme participants to feel welcomed, received, and appreciated. Upon introducing girls to a program, it is important to introduce them to everyone in the organization, as well as what each member on the team contributes to the organization. This increases the network of support, connection and belonging for girls and femmes.

Safe spaces must include access to femme resources that support comfort and safety; this includes having multiple types of feminine hygiene products available at the program site, bathrooms that are gender expansive, inclusive of a changing stations for babies and infants. Resources and referrals for counseling, education, and job opportunities that are open and supportive of young womyn, femmes, GNC and non-binary youth. Access to resources is knowledge sharing and is more robust when spaces feel safe for all participants.

In order to create spaces where girls feel safe, the element of choice needs to be present. Programs should allow participants to choose, as an example, shifting the language from, to “you have to be here” to “we want to provide you the space to make a choice to be here.”

Because system experience is generally deemed as a “man's problem,” many programs and even alternative to incarceration programs

are designed for young men. This translates into program experiences being gendered; all aspects of programming from curriculum, work experiences, leadership skills, excursions and resources should be inclusive, rather than reproduce the gendered norms that negatively impact girls and womyn.

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES TO ALL SYSTEM-IMPACTED WOMYN, GIRLS AND FEMMES.

Expanding the definition of “system-impacted” allows us to engage with girls who may have never been arrested but still feel the brutal effects of the carceral state. System-impacted includes girls who are supporting someone who has been arrested or incarcerated. It also includes young womyn and femmes who have family members or familial relationships with someone who has been arrested, detained or incarcerated. System-impact includes going through metal detectors on visits, police contact that may not end in arrest, feeling the impact of an absent relative due to incarceration, giving financially to someone incarcerated, and writing letters or taking calls from people that are incarcerated. In using a more expansive definition we can be inclusive and cognizant of how the punishment system lands on femmes differently and in ways that can be invisible. Incarceration hurts all of us. We all deserve opportunities of support.

“WHILE IN THE DETENTION CENTER, I WAS HANGING OUT WITH OUR GIRLS IN THEIR HALL. THE TWO OLDEST GIRLS THAT HAD BEEN IN AND OUT HAD A CONVERSATION WITH THE YOUNGEST GIRL ABOUT NOT COMING BACK. THEY ALSO WERE TALKING TO HER ABOUT PARENTS GIVING UP ON THEIR CHILD AND HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO HAVE YOUR MOM BY YOUR SIDE BECAUSE THAT’S THE ONLY PERSON WHO’S GOING TO STAY IN YOUR CORNER. I DIDN’T EVEN HAVE TO SPEAK I JUST OBSERVED AND WAS AMAZED AT THE LEADERSHIP THESE GIRLS WERE DEMONSTRATING AND REFLECTING ON THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES.”

—FIELDNOTES FROM A RESEARCHER ON THE TEAM

POLICY CHANGE

Community visioning was an intentional part of our focus groups as well as the interview process. Solutions need to include policy changes that surpass the four walls of institutions. Policy changes work to reflect larger national trends and the prioritization of shifting systems. We recommend supporting national and local initiatives that seek to reduce the number of girls arrested, detained incarcerated, or justice system involved. And we believe that there should be continued education, dialogue, and action on policy-level changes and shifts that empower girls and womyn.

“WE ARE SO LIMITED IN THE BRONX, SOME OF US ARE POOR SO WE CAN’T AFFORD METRO CARDS TO GO ANYWHERE.”

—CCFY, 23 YEARS OLD, PROSPECT AVE.



CALL TO ACTION FOR FOCUSED POLICY CHANGE

DEDICATE FUNDING TOWARDS COMMUNITY-BASED, GENDER RESPONSIVE INSTITUTIONS.

In our movements towards challenging and reforming the criminal justice system, there needs to be increased advocacy for dedicated funding to support system-impacted girls and womyn. This funding should strategically go towards community reinvestment (i.e. affordable housing, stronger educational systems), justice divestment (redirecting funds from lockup systems towards youth and community development), and grassroots and local organizations that are intentional about supporting girls. Funding and economic equity matters. While there are strong and inspiring histories and legacies of community organizing and the strength of people power, we know that money is a powerful tool of change, and demand that financial resources be allocated to these programmatic efforts Economic investment illustrates that issues are priorities.

PROTECTIONS FOR FAMILIES THAT HAVE IMMIGRATED TO THE UNITED STATES.

Immigrants face a plethora of challenges in the United States given violent, xenophobic and often racist anti-immigrant sentiments. And, when immigrant families come in contact with the legal system, they do not have the necessary supports. This is particularly true for the first generation girls whose family members and support systems are immigrants. We call for the protection of immigrant parents and family members, especially those that are undocumented. Undocumented family members are often afraid or not able to attend court, visit their children while incarcerated, or pick up their children from precincts if needed. 30% of our survey respondents had parents that were not born in the United States, which closely reflects the demographics of the Bronx, which has about 34% of its residents as foreign-born.¹ Overall, half a million people are estimated to be undocumented in New York City.² And, moreover,

as the national climate spikes in its violent anti-immigrant positions, it is our duty, as a rich, diverse, and pro-immigrant city, to illustrate what a supportive climate looks like. Girls and womyn are the keystones of families, and the criminal legal system erodes families and relationships. Supporting immigrant familial bonds on a policy level means supporting the individuals and networks that support system-impacted girls.

KEEPING FAMILY CONFLICT OUT OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM.

There is an over-reliance on the criminal justice system to solve and intervene in family problems. This often occurs because there are few other supports such as drop-in centers, peacebuilders, social workers, community centers, that families can rely on. Because of this, we call for healing informed practices that divert girls from the juvenile legal system that are arrested for family conflicts. The majority of low risk girls who spend the night in detention are there because of conflict they had at home. There should be policies that allow community worker, restorative justice facilitators and Credible Messengers to be the first people on site for family conflicts. Police should not be the first line of support.

LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE DEMAND SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS, COMMUNITY PARTNERS, AND ALL WILLING TO CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR YOUNG FEMMES TO UNDERSTAND THAT GENDER AND SEXUALITY ARE IMPORTANT FACTORS OF IDENTITY.

We advocate a deeper understanding of gender identity and the spectrum of sexuality possible for developing young femmes. We also understand that this is a multi-layered and an issue with very real material consequences. LGBTQ, trans, and GNC youth frequently receive harsher punishments and inhumane treatment while in detention. We hope that as our work continues we are able to explore the depth and critical nature of these issues.

1. Census. 2017. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/bronxcountybronxboroughnewyork/PST045217>
2. <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/07/undocumented-new-yorkers-living-in-fear-ice-deportation.html>

IDEOLOGICAL SHIFTS AND A DIFFERENT WORLD

SYSTEMS AND SOCIETY HAVE PRE-CONDITIONED EXPECTATIONS OF HOW A GIRL SHOULD LOOK, SPEAK AND ACT. AND, GIRLS WHO PRESENTED OUTSIDE OF THE GENDER BOX EXPRESSED THEY WERE TREATED HARSHER THAN THEIR PEERS.

We understand that the most important, but most difficult work, is in shifting ideology, ideas, and values. This is the true metric of change. We know that inequity and mistreatment perpetuates when we focus on surface level change instead of the deep, hard work of examining the underlying beliefs that undergird our systems. Gender responsive jails are not created by painting the cell walls pink (yes, this actually happens!). Addressing girls and womyn's experiences within the system requires acknowledging that patriarchy and gender inequity exists. It requires us saying out loud that our world is not structured to value womyn and femmes in fair and just ways. It requires understanding how gender norms and expectations create different, and harmful pathways towards system contact. We cannot talk about a change in the world without a radical change of our values.

Reports like, *Girl Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girl's Girlhood*, and *The Killing the Black Body*, confirmed that the ideologies that remain present today are consistent with the lens in which Black womyn and girls have historically been viewed in the United States. Systems and society have pre-conditioned expectations of how a girl should look, speak and act. And, girls who presented outside of the gender box expressed they were treated harsher than their peers. One of our girls, shared how her arrest involved being attacked by two men, and she was the only one arrested. She felt discriminated against because of how she looked, when the videos proved she was approached. She went to court for 6 months until finally it was dismissed.

CALL TO ACTION FOR IDEOLOGICAL SHIFTS

These recommendations are for the individuals and community, for organizations, for agencies and truthfully the world. Our ideologies inform how we navigate and see the world.

ALL SYSTEM STAFF NEED TO BE TRAINED TO HAVE A GENDER LENS.

Allowing young people to define their gender outside or inside the binary without question or judgement. System staff should understand and acknowledge that gender exists beyond man and womyn—there is a spectrum of gender that must be celebrated and acknowledged. Individuals and particularly those supporting young people must be gender sensitive and aware that gender is a social construct, an identity choice, and young people's relationship to it can be nonlinear, fluid, and change. Young people should not be punished or shamed for this journey, but rather, should be seen as innovators and leaders in challenging binaristic, outdated notions of gender, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

ACKNOWLEDGING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND HOLDING MEN ACCOUNTABLE.

As stated above, 82% of survey respondents marked that domestic violence was a major issue for womyn in their communities. Within our focus groups and interviews girls and womyn shared experiences of violence from men in their lives. They shared that when they disclosed their experiences of violence to other family members or adults in their lives such as in school, often, they were blamed and the men were not held accountable for their actions. Supporting womyn means believing them. Supporting womyn means undoing toxic masculinity. Supporting womyn means asking men to be better. Supporting womyn means men and boys need to support each other. Supporting womyn means stop blaming them for the violence they experience. Supporting womyn means valuing us, respecting us, and listening to us.

GENDER IS NOT AN ADD-ON BUT A CONSISTENT THREAD.

Gender is not an ingredient that gets to be stirred into conversations, programs, or ideas when it is convenient or only when femmes call attention to it. Gender, just as race, class, sexuality, or citizenship status, greatly impacts our positions, identities, and access to power. Gender impacts everyone. Particularly for girls and womyn. This means that everyone should have a gender lens, be working towards gender equity, and acknowledging, learning about, and understanding how gender impacts material lives, communities, institutions, and larger ideologies. Particularly when it comes to the issues that specifically impact the lives of womyn and girls, it is important that gender, be a leading component of how programming, language, and resources are created, used and distributed All social justice work must be infused with a gender-equity framework.

RESPECT PLACES CREATED BY PEOPLE OF COLOR, FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR.

Historically, the content, programming, ideas, and perspectives of people of color have been exploited, disregarded, and denied because of the white supremacist and oppressive culture of the United States. It is critical to undo these practices. We would like to promote and encourage spaces for people of color where they can explore self advocacy, self determination and love- all towards our truth and destiny.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONSIDER:

- 1. DO NOT USE TRAUMA AS A LABEL TO PATHOLOGIZE INDIVIDUALS AND/OR COMMUNITIES.**
- 2. UPROOTING PATRIARCHY THAT'S SPECIFICALLY FOR MALE IDENTIFIED PEOPLE**
- 3. MORE FEMME LEADERS IN ORGANIZATIONS**
- 4. MORE CONVERSATIONS AROUND SAFE SEX, BODY BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT**
- 5. A REMINDER: MORE RESPONSIBILITIES FOR YOUTH ≠ MORE ACCOUNTABILITY/MORE PUNISHMENT FOR YOUTH.**

Trauma can be understood and acknowledged with sensitivity and nuance, rather than a mechanism to push for overused mental health diagnoses. While we believe the acknowledgment of mental health concerns are important issues, we also see that young womyn can be misdiagnosed and unfairly labeled for showing behavior that challenges gender norms; such as being labeled as bipolar when expressing emotions, being labeled as having anger issues when discussing healthy rage and called oppositional and aggressive when resisting control.



LET THESE RECOMMENDATIONS BE SOME OF THE SEEDS WE WATER TO CULTIVATE THE CHANGE WE KNOW IS POSSIBLE.



CONCLUSION

The entangled issues of gender, race, punishment, and divestment are longstanding. When we dive deeply into them, searching to understand the intersections and how people are impacted by them, we can sometimes come to the surface feeling overwhelmed. These are tough problems!

The findings of this report illustrate how the experiences of young femmes of color that have had contact with the criminal legal system can be made invisibilized and how navigating the system, and the subsequent impacts wears on relationships and families. The experiences of young womyn, femmes, and girls of color are complex. They are often forced to navigate the balance of emotional labor while maintaining their responsibilities in their families. They are asked to do this, while also feeling marginalized, dealing with harm and violence, and lacking gender-based support systems within system-mandated programming. However, throughout this project what was most impactful was the way in which womyn, while dealing with the impacts of the legal system develop, manage and learn from transformational relationships with each other, the womyn in their families, and with femme mentors. In order to have healthy communities flourishing relationships, and a more equitable, thriving society the issues created by gender inequity need to be addressed. Our society has a heavy reliance on a legal system that operates as a system of punishment, and as a society we are addicted to it. The impact of the legal system on womyn and girls, continues to go unnoticed and unaddressed because of its inability to understand and respond to the needs of girls and womyn. Our recommendations for change are intentionally articulated across a spectrum of possibility; recommendations are inclusive of specific program-based changes and more sweeping ideological shifts. There are sites across the country, in our own neighborhoods, and within institutions that are engaging in some of these transformative practices. These look like gender-neutral bathrooms, language inclusive of the gender binary, comprehensive family engagement,

the creation of and celebration of femme leadership, and even re-defining what leadership looks like. However, there is still much work to be done.

G.I.R.L.S worked to embody the definition of inclusive and expansive leadership. We intentionally created space within this project that looked like the type of world we would like created. Each aspect of the research and report process was done inclusively and collectively. Our process was equally as important as the findings that were elevated. The road of inquiry impacts the outcomes of research. We hope that the spirit of participation, community-expertise, and femme leadership is embodied in the afterlives and movement forward from this work.



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GLOSSARY

Below, is a list of terms used throughout the report. We understand that language is important, but also complex. We have worked to be inclusive and intentional about the words and terms used.

Adultification treating young people or expecting young people to behave as adults.

Autoethnography a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings.

Carceral having to do with any and all aspects of incarceration. Refers to lockup, prison, detention, jails, arrest, court, probation and other system related acts..

Carceral State the all encompassing nature of incarceration and the ways in which “the state” (governments, economies, states themselves) are reliant on incarceration.

Credible Messenger

Mentoring A transformative process that involves individuals from similar backgrounds, especially men and womyn who themselves were justice involved engage youth in structured and intentional relationships that help them change their attitudes, beliefs and actions.

Emotional Labor the unaccounted and unrecognized time and energy placed in supporting those we love and care for.

Ethics moral principles that govern a person’s behavior or the conducting of an activity.

Femme an individual whose appearance and behavior are seen as traditionally feminine.

Feminine-of-Center an acknowledgment of the fluidity of gender and its spectrum. Generally, gender is considered binary/two sides: man and woman. When we work to challenge this, we offer the idea of a spectrum instead, where masculinity and femininity can be and is embodied by all people in different ways. This term identifies and refers to people that see themselves on the more feminine side of the gender spectrum.

Gender used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female.

Gender Binary the idea that there are only two genders and every person is one of these two.

Gender Expression the way in which a person expresses their gender identity, typically through their appearance, dress, and behavior.

Gender Identity a person’s perception of having a particular gender, which may or may not correspond with their birth sex.

Gender Non-Conforming denoting or relating to a person whose behavior or appearance does not conform to prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate to their gender.

Gender Norms a behavior or attribute that society attributes to a particular sex. Gender norms change from culture to culture and throughout history, since they’re based on the expectations of societies that are consistently evolving.

Gender Roles socially constructed behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for people.

Gender Spectrum a way of describing gender without conforming to the gender binary. It denotes gender as a continuum that includes male and female, but without establishing them as absolutes or polar opposites.

Hegemonic ruling or dominant in a political or social context.

Holistic characterized by comprehension of the parts of something as intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole.

Ideology a set of messages, ideas, and ways of being that are created by the large

Indigenous originating or occurring naturally in a particular place; native.

Intersectionality the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Masculine-of-Center an acknowledgment of the fluidity of gender and its spectrum. Generally, gender is considered binary/two sides—man and woman. When we work to challenge this, we offer the idea of a spectrum instead, where masculinity and femininity can be and is embodied by all people in different ways. This term identifies and refers to people that see themselves on the more masculine side of the gender spectrum.

Non-Binary not adhering to or identifying within the gender binary

Participatory Action Research (PAR) an approach to research used by communities to survey, collect, and analyze data as a means of change, collaboration and creation of shared knowledge.

Restorative justice a system of criminal justice which focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large.

Sex either of the two primary categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions.

Sexuality a person's sexual orientation or preference.

Social Divestment policies, practices, and historical trends that inadvertently and intentionally decrease the social wellbeing of specific communities and people. For example, when people are incarcerated and have documented records they have a “lower” social standing—they are considered criminals, bad people, and immoral, and this results in less opportunities for them (employment, family relationships, education, etc.)

Somatic relating to the body, especially as distinct from the mind.

Stasis equilibrium

The State having to do with the government, policies, and the resulting ideologies that support the dominant political perspective.

Turtle Island this is what many indigenous groups call North America. Employing this naming reminds us of other worldviews and acknowledges that the soil of the United States was home to a diverse set of people, communities, and worldviews pre colonial contact.

Womanism a term to celebrate and acknowledge Black women and their role in fighting for equity. A deliberate distinction from the term “feminism,” which, at a point in history, was used only to refer to white women. For beautiful writing on “womanism” and its definition, see Alice Walker 1983 citation in “Bibliography”

Womyn nonstandard spelling of “women” adopted by some feminists in order to avoid the word ending -men.

RESOURCES

Our work is inspired and impacted by a diverse set of history, organizations, movements, music and more. This project is in conversation with many ongoing projects and we know that we do not do this work in isolation. We also believe that, as we say in The Bronx “biggups!” are part of the culture (aka: sharing and shouting people out is key!). Below, find a list of resources: websites, organizations, songs, etc. that are connected to this work.

ORGANIZATIONS

B.R.E.A.T.H.E
GEMS (Girls Education & Mentoring Services)
Girls for Gender Equity
Khmer Girls in Action
Sadie Nash Leadership Project
The Essie Justice Group
United Playaz of New York
Young Women’s Freedom Center
Youth Justice Coalition

CAMPAIGNS

Close Rikers (www.closerikers.org)
Raise the Age (raisetheagency.com, www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/juvenile-justice/key-initiatives/raise-age-nc)
No kids in Prisons (nokidsinprison.org)

MUSIC, MEDIA + ART

Solange Knowles: When I Get Home
The Dangers of Harmful Research
Henrietta Lacks
The Havasupai Indigenous Nation and the Biological Battle
Participatory Research
Morris Justice Project
The People’s Report
The Streets of Harlem Documentary

WEBSITES

Community Connections for Youth (cc-fy.org)
UPofNY
The Knotted Line (knottedline.com)
PBS: Testing The Pill in Puerto Rico (www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-puerto-rico-pill-trials/)

ABOUT THE TEAM



SHANIQUA WEST (NINI) is a mentor and the Project Manager for *G.I.R.L.S N' Da Hood*. Inspired by *G.I.R.L.S N' Da Hood*, NiNi co-founded *Urban Girl Magic*, a program which creates space for young women of color to make connections with each other, grow in their leadership skills, and ultimately, become the best advocates they can for themselves. NiNi has recognized that she is a role model for young women of color and an invaluable part of her community. Over the years, NiNi grew a passion for working with young people and inspiring them to reach their full potential. Her positive energy and charismatic approach to mentoring is effective and exemplarily. She has taken advantage of every opportunity that has come her way. A graduate of Hostos Community College, with her associates in liberal arts, she has overcome extreme obstacles and has never put her head down or stopped believing in herself. She continues her education at Lehman College studying sociology. Shaniqua has made it her life's work and purpose to fight for, uplift, and create positive spaces for colored girls everywhere. NiNi's dream is to one day open a community center for women in The Bronx!



CRYSTALIE ROMERO-SMITH is a mentor, lead researcher and Co-founder of *Urban Girl Magic*. Crystalie better known as Leelee is a Bronx native Latina and currently a student at the School of Labor & Urban Studies, where she is studying Urban Studies and Community Leadership. Through *G.I.R.L.S N' Da Hood* Crystalie has seen the importance in supporting young women from her community. In 2018 Crystalie and Shaniqua West started a young women's leadership program called *Urban Girl Magic* which provides space for young women of color to find their voice through leadership, learning different ways of self-care and inspiring them to be their best-selves. Healing is very important to Crystalie and through art she was able to heal and find her passion. She started a seasonal program called *Art in Motion*, which explores the connection between art and the healing process. Through *Art in Motion*, young people engage in a creative process through visual arts, music, movement and other forms of expression. These sessions are about restoring emotional balance. Crystalie's goal is provide a positive and rewarding encounter with art leading to emotional healing.



DEVANTE LEWIS, a Harlem baddie, Boogie Down baller comes into this work a firecracker ready to dismantle and be done with all oppressive systems of hate and bigotry. On his downtime, he likes to spend time with friends frolicking around the city and loving on his family*! He has actively been involved in social justice work since his early teens and has made his compassion for his people and vision for their collective liberation a part of his career path. He currently serves as a Mentor with Community Connections for Youth/ United Playaz. He is also *G.I.R.L.S N' Da Hood* Data Analyst. Lewis is the founder of *The Writhe's Project*, a space created for young femme writers of color to express their personal narratives in fun and empowering ways. This initiative was inspired by his participation in *G.I.R.L.S N' Da Hood* with the intention to share back our findings with the community in creative, innovative, and engaging ways. He is the revenge of his ancestors.



DR. WHITNEY RICHARDS-CALATHES is a community researcher and transformative justice practitioner. For over ten years she has worked on issues that she believes deeply in and that inspire her: young women's leadership development, educational access, prison abolition, racial justice, and gender equity. She received her PhD from The Graduate Center at The City University of New York. She wrote her dissertation on how the intersections of the carceral system, geography, and gentrification impact multi-generations of Black women in Los Angeles. Her work has taken her to all parts of New York City, Los Angeles, Toronto, San Diego, Detroit, Chicago, Durham, and the Bay Area. Whitney believes that social justice is beyond the jobs we have though - it is an ethic in how we live life, build relationships, respect and interact with the Earth, how we value ourselves. In *7 Generations of Bronx Femmes*, Whitney worked to train and support *G.I.R.L.S N' Da hood* in their brilliance. She is in awe of the development of this project - the issues you read in these pages are critical to uplift in our movements for young women's empowerment and prison abolition, but beyond the words, Whitney hopes that you see the strength and power of femme-centered leadership, femme research, and the commitment to participation. Lastly, Whitney is an ocean-loving Black woman, born and raised in the Bronx.



AMELIA FRANK is a passionate youth advocate, who has over 20 years of experience empowering young people to positively impact their communities. In her current role as Community Connection For Youth's Director of Youth Development, Amelia works with community and juvenile justice system stakeholders, both in the Bronx and nationally, to create alternatives to incarceration programming for youth impacted by the juvenile justice system. Her work has led her to create positive youth development programming for young people throughout the South Bronx community, in Horizon Juvenile Detention Center, and Bronx County Family Court. Amelia is also the founding director of *United Playaz of New York*, a youth-led violence prevention program focused on youth leadership and character development. Before joining CCFY in 2012, Amelia spent seven years as the Community Associate and Academic Intervention Services Coordinator for Banana Kelly High School in the Bronx. Amelia received her B.A. in Child Development from California State University, Chico in 2001 and a Masters in Humanities and Leadership from the New College in San Francisco in 2004. One of the core values Amelia brings to her work and to the world, is the force of love; love as a form of freedom, as a transformative and healing energy, as a power that we all can receive, embody, and share.



PROMITI ISLAM is an educator, youth advocate, writer, and dreamer that believes in the power of community mobilization to enact social change. For the past ten years, Promiti has been involved with award-winning organizations and campaigns across grassroots, national, and global landscapes focused on amplifying the voices of minoritized and marginalized individuals against the realities of racial and gender inequity in our world today. Promiti is passionate about mission-driven work, starting her career as an intern at the Sadie Nash Leadership Project and leaving as Director of their flagship Summer Institute, continuing on to The Posse Foundation as a National Training Specialist, and leading a team of international volunteers in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka with Visions Global Empowerment. She has also worked at the NYC Mayor's Office for Immigrant Affairs, launching a citywide public education campaign on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Most recently, Promiti was the Senior Director of Girls Initiatives at the YWCA of the City of New York, overseeing a diverse collection of programs focused on leadership development, youth empowerment, and social justice education. She has dual B.A.s from Wesleyan University in both Anthropology and American Studies and an M.A. in Transcultural and International Education from Columbia University – Teachers College. At Community Connections For Youth, Promiti is currently involved in a Participatory Action Research Project examining the recently concluded 4As ARCHES Alumni Program and is grateful to have been invited to support the tireless work of the truly inspiring and incredible *G.I.R.L.S N' Da Hood*. She loves the ocean, pop culture, writing poetry, and black eyeliner.



AISHATU YUSUF has focused her career on child safety, youth and adult legal system reform, child protection, and education policy. With the belief that change must be envisioned through an intersectional lens that captures race and gender identity, Aishatu has worked to reduce the education, health, and employment barriers for formally incarcerated women; evaluated the strengths and needs of girls in gangs; and is currently working with the National Black Women's Justice Institute on participatory research that address interrupting school to confinement pathways for girls of color. Aishatu has worked with federal, state, and local governments to address issues that permeate the youth and adult legal system. She has partnered with youth legal systems and education systems across the county to develop cross system intervention and justice prevention programs. She has presented her research at numerous conferences, has trained educators and law enforcement professionals across the nation, and has authored and co-authored various articles, book chapters, and other publications. Aishatu currently leads Impact Justice's California Justice Leaders -AmeriCorps planning project focused on providing employment and training to formally incarcerated individuals. Aishatu serves as the Senior Education and Re-entry Policy Fellow for the National Black Women's Justice Institute, and the Project Director, California Justice Leaders at Impact Justice. Aishatu holds two bachelor degrees from the University of Utah and a master's degree in Public Administration from Northeastern University. Aishatu served as the copy editor for *7 Generations of Bronx Femmes*.

**WE HOPE THAT WITHIN SEVEN GENERATIONS
FROM NOW, OUR GIRLS WILL BE FREE**





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