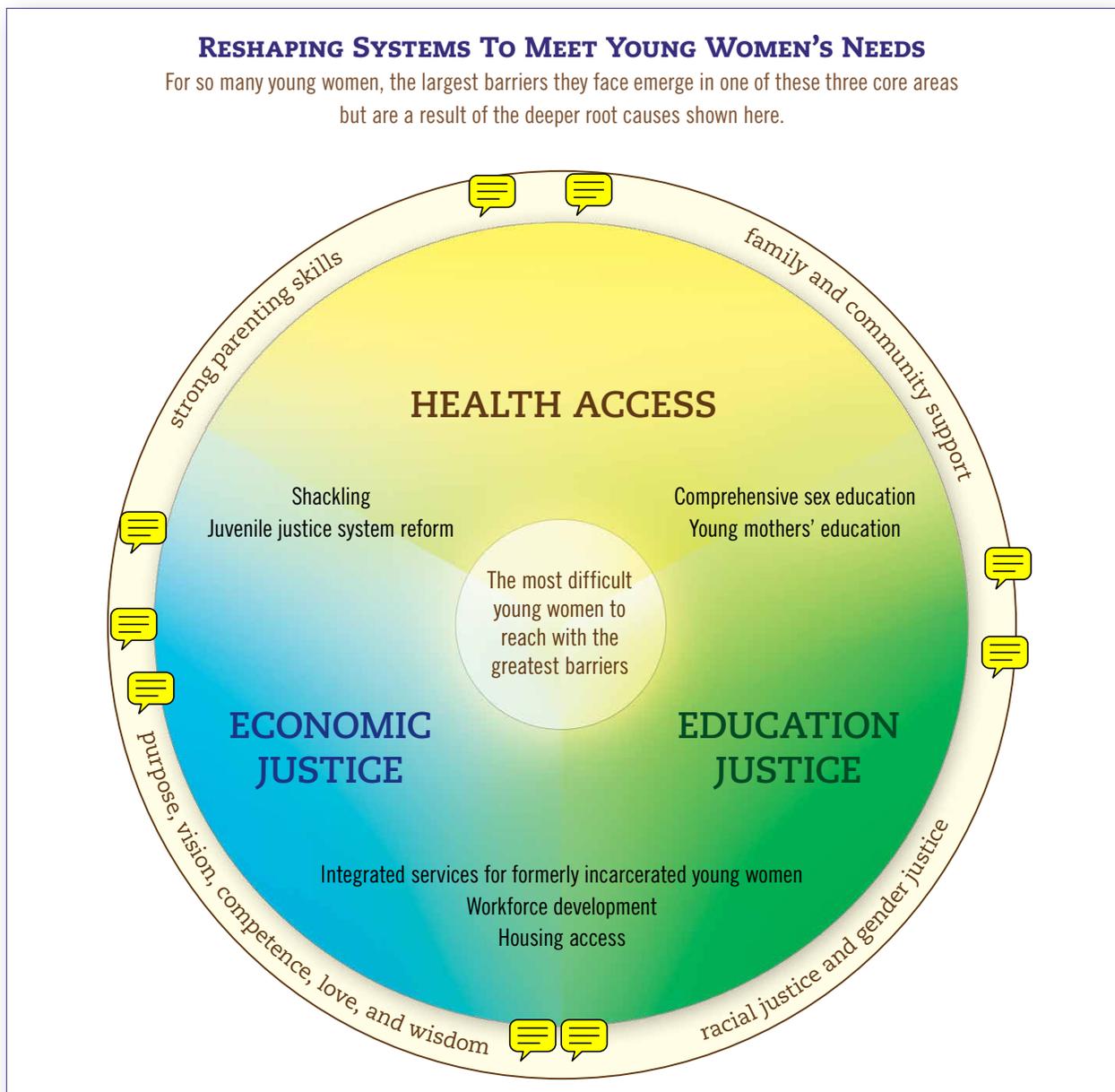


GIRLS SPEAK OUT: ADVOCATING FOR OURSELVES AND OUR FAMILIES



The Center for Young Women’s Development (CYWD) has a long legacy of supporting young women who live at the furthest margins of community - young women of color ages 16-24 who are mothers, undocumented immigrants, lesbian/bisexual/transgender, and/or incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. By extending CYWD’s existing community support networks to these young women, we ensure that all young women can get the help they need. Our model provides direct support, life skills, and a place for young women to become leaders in their families and communities. We have discovered that the road to transformation for young women is most successful when the solutions address intersecting issues at the root causes. For young women at the margins, their health and wellness depend on policies that protect their reproductive health needs, support and advocacy within the juvenile and criminal justice system, and economic self-sufficiency—including access to workforce opportunities, education, and housing for the women and their families.



For almost two decades, the CYWD has implemented strategies that look beyond traditional direct services. Our work reaches more than 3,500 young women each year, yet there are thousands more across the San Francisco Bay Area, and millions across the country, that struggle every day to make a way for themselves and their families. We understand that the social challenges that these young women face cannot be fully addressed with single-issue responses. To remove the current barriers these young women experience, we need a comprehensive plan that will institutionalize a gender-specific, strength-based, trauma-informed health and wellness agenda. In order to impact them, we must develop our capacity to shape the policies and systems that govern these young women's lives.

The change articulated in this brief lays out a path for the Center for Young Women's Development to support even more young women over the next ten years, in part by passing legislation we call the "Young Mother's Bill of Rights.". Through building our policy advocacy infrastructure over the next two years and deepening our research capacity, we will be able to translate our Young Mother's Bill of Rights into regional and statewide policies. This landmark bill outlines a national standard for developing gender-specific, strength-based, trauma-informed programs that meet the complex reproductive health and human rights needs of marginalized young women. From our work to prevent the shackling of pregnant young women inside the juvenile justice system, to the establishment of a taskforce for sexually exploited girls, we are willing to engage in the most difficult but necessary conversations and work. We see this as an important evolution to becoming a national leader in empowering young women so their voices can be heard.

"The Center is the only place I feel comfortable being myself. They have taught me how to be a better person and a better mother. The support I receive from CYWD staff is priceless. I want to stay involved as long as I can."

—Denis Flannigan

"CYWD supported me through my own transition and gave me the opportunity to acknowledge my choice to become a parent, which empowered me to advocate and fight for the need to support other young mothers."

— Monica Flores, 19

The Center for Young Women's Development is uniquely positioned to help shape and carve this policy agenda. We are a leading force in supporting the young women who are the hardest to reach, and we have built a national reputation as a leader in the field of Juvenile Justice and Gender-responsive programming. Our framework for understanding the barriers young women face is embedded within our theory of change. We believe that the only way to shift life outcomes and increase opportunities for these young women is to address cross-sectional systems-wide reform.

Key Findings

Analyze decision-making points across social systems for gender: Throughout each of these systems there are key decision-making points where gender can, and should, be inserted as a lens to help better meet the needs of the young women we support. Each of these four systems must be thoroughly studied to determine if gender disparities exist and how they impact young women. If these disparities exist, strategies must be developed and implemented to eliminate them. Further, based on the gender-specific needs of young women, these key decision-making points must be analyzed to determine if more appropriate gender sensitive/responsive decisions can be implemented.

Develop research-based, gender-specific programs for young women: Women’s development (social, physical, emotional and mental) differs from young men’s. Gender-specific programming that integrates a racial justice framework is essential to providing meaningful treatment and support.

Contribute to the knowledge base of best practices: Given that there is relatively little research on what works for the hardest-to-reach young women, it is essential that gender specific programs and services be documented to contribute to the field’s knowledge base.

“[The Center for Young Women’s Development] taught me that eventually all the pieces fall into place. Until then, laugh at the confusion, live for the moment and know that everything happens for a reason.”

—Janique Banks, 17

Our Policy Advocacy Strategy

Through a combination of policies and community-based programs, we seek to weave a tighter and stronger safety net for young women by targeting key institutions in which to implement structural change. We are clear that many of the strategies we advance in our platform will raise the level of discussion and debate around these young women’s futures — a debate that we feel is critical to making their needs a top policy priority within California and the nation.

Central to our strategy is filling important research gaps on the impact of systems on the young women we support. Through a partnership with graduate students and the Public Policy and Business departments at Mills College, we will teach young women how to collect urgently needed data to support our policy efforts. Policy reform is most successful when it is accompanied by relationships and knowledge that create behaviors and culture shifts. Developing our research capacity will also provide the young women with whom we work valuable skills in critical thinking, writing, and strategy — skills that will help them to not simply secure jobs but build careers.

Meeting young women’s reproductive health needs within the health care system:

Young mothers face incredible difficulty in their pursuit of success and wellness. While we recognize that helping young women make the family planning decisions that support their full growth,

ultimately we must support them at the deeper roots of their barriers, disproportionate rates of poverty. The lack of good healthcare and reproductive health resources threatens their ability to build and support their families. Our strengths-based focus centers reproductive health needs with strong mental health resources that are both culturally competent and holistically structured.

In the long term: We demand respect, dignity, and our full rights as parents. We demand access to comprehensive sex education, contraception, and an end to the violence and the discrimination that LGBTQ youth and young women face.

In the short term: We will fight for the recognition that young parents need support not punishment and discrimination. We will educate policy makers about the violence and discrimination that LGBTQ youth and young women face. In addition to engaging teachers and parents, we will target a wide range of people providing information and education on sexuality. These could include health professionals, peer educators, recreation and community center staff, sociologists and psychologists, as well as those who specialize in teaching sex education.

Reproductive Justice encompasses the physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls and is based on the full achievement and protection of women's



rights. This definition, as outlined by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice/Forward Together, offers a new perspective on advocacy for reproductive issues. Reproductive health is a fundamental, primary need for young women. For many of the young women we support, their annual visits to their gynecologists are likely to be their primary interaction with the health care system and their only consistent contact with a doctor.

While many scholars have been critical of the tendency to scapegoat teenage mothers for society's ills (e.g., Rhode 1993-1994; Males 1996; Luker 1997; Glassner 1999) there is a persistent lack of policies that adequately meet the needs of and improve outcomes for young women. We believe that the lack of political will among policy makers is driven by negative social and cultural perceptions that demonize young mothers. These negative views persist even though evidence shows that supporting young mothers has a direct positive impact on their lives in multiple ways. Thus, the CYWD policy platform provides an opportunity for young mothers on the margins of our society to redefine themselves. With access to health care resources and community support, these young women can thrive.

Young women inside and out of the juvenile justice system: Through gender responsive services, CYWD advocates to hold the juvenile justice system accountable to the needs of young women. Yet critical needs, such as increasing delivery of services on the inside and ensuring that women have a safe environment to transition into when they leave, still remain unmet.

In the long term: We hope to end the over representation of girls of color in the juvenile justice system and end the criminalization of youth.



“Girls in the juvenile justice system are, in a word, survivors. In the relatively short time they have lived, they have learned to stay alive, care for themselves, make the best of what they have and start again the next day.”

—Marlene Sanchez

In the short term: We will demand that juvenile justice systems collect gender-specific and culturally-relevant data (e.g. sexual orientation, parenting status, and ethnicity), develop appropriate services and ensure transparency and accountability, and work toward safe housing for every young woman that exits the system to allow them rebuild their lives.

Girls make up the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population,

now representing nearly one in every three juvenile arrests (OJJDP, 2008). As a group, their reasons for involvement in the juvenile justice system are different than boys. Girls who are chronic runaways often have significant levels of sexual and physical victimization, suggesting that a main cause of their involvement in the system has to do with fleeing unsafe environments. Young women who are physically assaultive often do so to stop their own victimization. Furthermore, young women involved in the juvenile justice system have more extensive trauma histories, mental health needs, and substance abuse problems than young men in the same system.

The American criminal and juvenile justice systems are broken. They have very little capability to give young women a chance to rebuild their lives or interrupt the cycles of violence they have experienced so that they can provide a different future for their children and families. Since mandatory-sentencing laws went into effect in the mid 1980's, the California female prison population has skyrocketed. At the end of 1986, women in California's prisons totaled 3,564. In 1998, the population reached 10,897—an increase of 305% in twelve years (CDCR). As of December 31, 2005, 65.7% of women in California prisons were incarcerated for non-violent offenses, the majority of which were drug-related (CDCR).



At the same time that these young women are reentering society, the economic downturn is forcing states and local governments to make even deeper cuts to services and support.

Roughly three-fourths of the 9,500 women in California's prisons are mothers, and many of them are single parents. Since October 1, 2011, the state has started to deliver on a mandate from the U.S. Supreme Court to remove 33,000 people from its bloated prison population. In this fast and furious process called realignment, it is easy to forget the impact this entire process is having on families, especially women with children. Since 1991, the number of children with a mother in prison has increased by more than 131%. These young women need our support to overcome barriers to their success, now more than ever.

Economic self-sufficiency for the young women at the margins includes three intersecting components: education reform and opportunities, career-track jobs, and access to safe housing: CYWD is increasingly being invited into conversations on school push out and disproportionate targeting of young women of color for special education. For the young women with whom we work, educational success and training precede careers, but all of these are conditional on a safe and secure place for them to live with their families.

In the long term: We hope to ensure that young women have access to quality education, meaningful well-paid employment, and safe/affordable housing.

In the short term: We will research barriers to education as well as the linked barriers to employment and housing for incarcerated and formally incarcerated young women and ensure integrated services and long-term support.

For the young women we support, the obstacles they face, such as being incarcerated or young and parenting, are not isolated events but rather a series of issues that make long-term employment and access to housing and health care elusive. We find this often starts with limited access to a quality education. Without direct education policies to support them, young women struggle to reintegrate into society.

The American public education system is losing its capacity to prepare young women for the modern workforce. The most recent international data shows that U.S. students are lagging far behind students in other industrialized nations. U.S. students scored “below average” in math on the PISA examination, placing the U.S. 25th out of the 34 OECD participant nations. Only 69% of teenagers’ complete high school in four years, 40% of young people hold an Associate of Arts or higher college degree, and fully half of U.S. employers report a gap between their needs and the skills of their workforce.

States and local governments have made deep cuts to education due to the economic downturn, and these young women are falling further behind. California—which ranks last in per-student K-12 spending—addressed a \$17.9 billion deficit by cutting billions from public education and will likely announce more cuts soon. Both the reduction in K-12 aid to local school districts and program cuts have hit adult literacy instruction and help for high-needs students particularly hard. For young women that are disproportionately pushed into special education classrooms or out of classrooms altogether, the end results are even more detrimental to their health, education, and ability to maintain a positive lifestyle.

“CYWD helped me find my voice and provided me with the knowledge and tools necessary to use my voice to advocate for not only myself but [other young women] as well”

—Nadiyah Shereff

Guiding Principles

CYWD answers first and foremost to the young women with whom we work – young women involved in the juvenile justice system, adult system, and foster care, and young women involved in the underground street economy. We believe that young women of color, poor young women, and queer young women are the experts on issues relating to this population and thus are best positioned to inform, guide, and manage the development of CYWD's work.

Our organization respects and honors individual, cultural, and spiritual beliefs and traditions and invites young women to incorporate them into their work at CYWD. We model cultural competency at all levels of our organization. We want young women to have opportunities to develop emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually in culturally appropriate environments.

We believe that fighting oppression is central to a process of healing. We believe that it is crucial for young women to have an understanding of systemic oppression and how it manifests in their lives. We believe that to heal, young women need to recognize and understand the systems of oppression that affect their lives. We inspire young women to be fierce: to commit to social change and to resist the abuse of power at all levels.

We believe in the power of sisterhood. We believe in young women helping other young women. We believe every young woman has the capacity to become a leader.

We believe that every young woman deserves opportunities to learn and grow. We believe young women need a caring and compassionate environment in which to learn about themselves, to acquire new skills, and to advocate for their needs and those of their sisters. We know young women need a safe space where confidentiality is ensured. We believe that in order to recognize their worth, young women need to be supported in their efforts to grow, to become stable and centered women in control of their lives.

We believe that the juvenile justice system as it currently exists must be abolished.

Research and program experiences suggest that policymakers and service providers need to remove legal and institutional barriers that impede young women's access to existing services across these systems. In addition, information and services need to be designed to accommodate the unique needs of these young women and their families. Examples include providing sexuality education in schools; sentencing and juvenile adjudication that accounts for young women being mothers; providing specially designed services for young women in clinics or community settings; and using social media and peer advocacy — where young women **direct engagement strategies** and are trained to talk to their peers — to share life skills and advocate within these systems. To be successful in creating systems-wide change, we must engage the voices and wisdom of the young women most impacted. They hold the keys to unlocking opportunity and prosperity, which in partnership with the resources of our organizations can change not just the trajectory of their lives but the lives of their families as well.

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