



Guidelines for Working With Young Women

Introduction and Facilitator's Guide from
*Young Women's Lives: Building
Self-Awareness for Life*

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YOUNG WOMEN'S LIVES: BUILDING SELF-AWARENESS FOR LIFE

is a program for young women, ages 14-19. It is designed to celebrate and enhance their strength, experience, creativity and intelligence. It is a group curriculum for young women working together to curtail destructive behavior, to support each other's success, and to connect to the ongoing struggles of women in this country for greater equality, opportunity and social justice. The curriculum is also designed to assist young women in reducing the negative impact of interpersonal and institutional violence.

Working through the curriculum will help them establish lives based on personal strength, self-confidence, connection to others, and involvement in community efforts to reduce violence against women.

The young women may come from a variety of settings: your school, a recreation program, a treatment program, a juvenile detention center. They may be youth leaders, "problem" youth, athletes, mothers, survivors of incest, runaways, or part of a girls' program. Despite the diversity of their backgrounds, and whether they have been identified as "in trouble" or not, they all have one thing in common—they are young women trying to build their lives in a society that fails to provide adequately for their safety, healing, education, growth, and personal and emotional health.

Drawing on the strength, understanding and experience of many young women, this curriculum will help the members of your group look at, heal from, and overcome the effects of the hurts, limitations, and abuse most young women experience. It can help them connect with their own best wisdom, with their sisters, with their foremothers, and with male allies so they can join in the struggle to dismantle the systems of power and violence that stunt lives and devastate families, relationships, and communities.

Young Women's Lives explores the effects of gender based,



racial/ethnic, and class based violence directed at girls and young women and allows them to build community without violence.

The primary goal of the curriculum is to create a safe place for young women to talk, to speak for themselves, to hear themselves, to hear one another, to hear the voices of women in the community and in history, and to do so in the presence of at least one adult who is listening with respectful, caring, and loving attention. The challenge for you is to be the listening adult who creates that safe place.

The second goal is to help young women, both individually and collectively, develop effective strategies to meet the difficult challenges they face in a society which does not always take their best interests into account. Robinson and Ward (in Leadbeater and Way, 1996) describe two kinds of resistance strategies which they characterize as resistance for survival and resistance for liberation. Young women develop different survival strategies based on the violence they experience and on the limited options many of them face. Coping with intense feelings of pain, violation, fear, powerlessness, and despair—in many cases without adequate support or even acknowledgment—some young women turn to alcohol and other drugs, silence, food, belligerence, perfectionism, manipulation, and other dangerous activities to survive. This curriculum can help young women move from resistance for survival to resistance for liberation—help them use their experience, support, intelligence, and inner wisdom to develop strategies which lead to their social liberation and personal success.

By *social liberation* we mean the collective freeing of young people in general and young women in particular from economic, racial, gender-based and other restrictions which stunt the lives of so many. In fact, we feel strongly that personal success can be understood only in the context of social and political struggle for a more liberatory (i.e. just and democratic) society.

To participate with young women in this liberatory endeavor you may have to disregard some of the (mis)information you have received about them—the daily flow of traditional stereotypes, media distortions and anti-woman bias from newspapers, books, movies, magazines, textbooks, friends and family. In addition, you have to be open to healing from your own experiences of violence, mistrust, disillusionment, and despair so that these don't get in the way of your being fully present for the young women with whom you are working.



Our Thesis

What if you assume that every young woman who came to your group was powerful whether she looked powerful to you or not?

How would your behavior be different if you were to assume that every young woman who came to your group was brilliant whether she appeared brilliant to you or not?

What if you assumed that every young woman who came to your group wanted positive connection with other young women and adults even though her demeanor was, perhaps, hostile, competitive, or withdrawn?

Our thesis is that *every young woman has incredible power, intelligence, strength, and resiliency.*

A young woman may mask these attributes to outsiders, or even to herself, as a result of abuse she has suffered or because of the cumulative impact of negative messages she has received about herself. The self-destructive survival strategies she has developed to cope with her world may shield us from her true self.

Many young women experience sexual harassment and sexual violence, economic discrimination, lack of educational opportunities and second-class citizenship in our society. Young women of color face the daily mistreatment, discrimination and abuse of racism. Young women from poor and working-class backgrounds have to cope with an even more severe lack of educational and job opportunities than their better off sisters, and are vulnerable to attacks on their dignity and self-respect. Young women from more privileged backgrounds may confront unrealistic expectations about their bodies, about whom their partners should be, about their economic and career possibilities and about their ability to avoid violence.

Young women courageously resist the conditioning that prepares them to accept this system and pass it on. They form alliances with one another across differences of race, class and sexual identity based on common political or economic interests, on creating the best world they can for their children, on mutual romantic interest, or on shared vulnerability to violence. These alliances are seldom portrayed by the media, obscuring the potential for powerful, effective social action across differences.

We want to be clear that although young women face serious obstacles to participating fully in the life of our society, they are



not “victims”. They are survivors, resisters, community members who make choices based on the information and experience they have. They are not passive; they are quite active. But their choices are often limited and may be based on survival strategies that are not in their long-term best interests. With your support they can become stronger, clearer, more effective community participants.

The Social and Political Context for Young Women’s Lives

We live in a world where women have made great contributions in science, politics, education, and the arts; and we live in a world where economic discrimination, gender-, race, and class- based violence stunt the lives of many. Factors such as poverty, domestic violence, racial discrimination, incest, lack of educational opportunities, and premature and unwanted pregnancy can be obstacles to healthy development and can limit many young women.

In our society, many women face the challenge of demanding that their lives be valued, that their contributions be acknowledged, and that the resources needed to support their growth and development be available to them. Historically, women have often come together to make such demands. They have had to for their own survival and for the survival of their children and communities.

Throughout U.S. history, women have led and participated in movements for social justice including workplace organizing, disability rights, women’s liberation, and antiracism struggles. *Young Women’s Lives* builds on and connects young women to the legacy of grassroots organizing for social justice carried out by generations of courageous women in their schools, neighborhoods, social and religious organizations, and work places. For example, poor black women in the south, determined to bring an end to the reign of Jim and Jane Crow segregation, drove the Civil Rights Movement. More recently, alliances among women enabled the establishment of rape crisis centers and battered women’s shelters. On another level, women’s consciousness raising and support groups have nurtured women to combat the pervasive presence of sexism.

Violence against Women

In this curriculum, we’re using the word *violence* to include physical, sexual, verbal, and psychological abuse, as well as



economic, educational, and other forms of discrimination, because they all cause hurt and pain and lead to further violence.

Young women unquestionably are vulnerable to violence. Many homes, streets, and schools are unsafe for them. We know that the streets can be dangerous places for young women, yet only 25% of violent acts inflicted on women occur in the street at the hand of a stranger. The other 75% occur in their own homes and usually are committed by someone they know.¹ Fathers, step fathers, uncles, “friends” of the family, boyfriends, cousins and older siblings sexually assault one of four girls before the girls reach the age of 18.² According to the Department of Justice, young people between the ages of 12 and 17 are the victims of crime five times more often than people over age of thirty-five.³ In another study, 40percent of girls ages 14 to 17 said they had a friend their own age who had been hit or beaten by a boyfriend.⁴ When these statistics are added together and coupled with other forms of institutional violence based on race, class, ability and sexual identity—the broad patterns of discrimination and abuse that young women of color, poor and working class young women, young women with disabilities, and young lesbians and bisexuals experience—it becomes clear that dealing with violence is a crucial issue in young women’s lives.

Institutionalized violence has a devastating effect on many young women. “Hostile Hallways”, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) report on sexual harassment in schools, documented that the level of sexual harassment experienced by high school girls from peers and teachers to be of such intensity and frequency that it interrupts learning for some girls and is a problem for most.⁵

Self inflicted violence

The second aspect of violence that young women confront stems from social pressures to be pretty, sexy—but not sexual—to be thin, blond, happy, and carefree and to please and take care of

¹ Women’s Action Coalition. *Stats: The Facts About Women* (New York: The New Press, 1993).

² Russell, Diana E.H. “The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children,” in *Handbook of Sexual Abuse of Children*, edited by Lenore E. A. Walker (New York: Springer, 1988).

³ Louis Harris and Associates. *Teens, Crime and the Community Program Poll*, 1996.

⁴ Gallup Organization, 1995.

⁵ American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. “Hostile Highways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America’s Schools,” conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, 1993. For more information, write to AAUW Educational Foundation Research, Dept. RR. INT, 1111 Sixteenth St. NW, Washington, DC 20036, or e-mail to foundation@mail.aauw.org; (202) 728-7602.



others. In their book *Between Silence and Voice*, Taylor et al. describe the disempowerment girls experience during adolescence when they are subject to intense pressure from family, peers and adults to conform to rigid gender-role expectations that conflict with how they see themselves and how they understand the world. These expectations and the multibillion dollar industries which promote and profit from them lead young women to commit violence against themselves as they internalize these impossible “standards” which they inevitably fail to live up to.

The diet industry alone currently grosses \$33 billion per year. 95 percent of enrollees in weight loss programs are women. A California study showed that, by the time girls entered fourth grade, 80 percent of them were already dieting. 85 percent of U.S. women diet 5 times a year; 98 percent regain the weight lost and then some. 90-95 percent of the people who have eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are girls and women. Cosmetic surgery companies have built a \$300 million a year industry in the United States capitalizing on insecurities women and girls experience about their bodies. One million U.S. women have had chemical sacs planted in their breasts, and the profits in that industry range between \$168 million and \$374 million.⁶

Eating disorders are just one type of self-destructive behavior that young women may engage in as a response to acts of violence, such as incest, or as a way to try to live up to impossible expectations. Suicide, alcohol and other drug abuse, and high risk sexual activity are other forms of self-directed violence covered in this curriculum.

Violence against others

The third form of violence addressed here is that which young women commit against others. Violence and power are glamorized by the media. The primary definition of power that people see around them is power *over* others, the power to control and to abuse others. It should be no surprise that young women are increasing turning to violence to survive and meet their needs.

In contrast to the competitive, self-serving, and abusive behavior promoted in many parts of our society and extolled in the media, this curriculum challenges young women to identify and reconnect with a larger community, to reject current social messages about

⁶ Women’s Action Coalition. *Stats*.



power and the use of violence, and to develop alternative ways to communicate with and support one another.

Beyond the numbers

We could quote many more statistics about the difficulties facing young women in contemporary society. But young women tend to get lost in the statistics in two ways. First, most of the numbers refer young people in general. The bulk of the information we have about youth and violence, health, and other subjects is based on research done on young men. They are more frequently studied, interviewed, seen (even if in negative ways), and generally attended to, either as successes or as failures, than are young women.

Just as important, the information we do have about young women tends to focus on the negative facets of their lives, not on their power, brilliance, strength, and resiliency. We pay attention to young women if they are in trouble or, more likely, when they are causing trouble to adults around them. At that point, we focus on them only long enough to prevent them from doing further damage to themselves or others. Then we move on to the next young women in crisis. We fail to address the social structure which places young women “at risk.” According to Taylor, et al. “A primary danger of the ‘at risk’ label is to shift attention away from the social conditions that place adolescents at risk and locate the risk within the adolescents themselves.” (p.21).

The negative information can seem so overwhelming that we are sometimes surprised that any young women make it to adulthood at all. Focusing on information about young women “at risk”—although it lets us identify the gaps, lacks, and problems in how we treat them—further our inclination to ignore all but the most desperate among them, those desperate enough to speak out in righteousness, to act out in anger, or to cry out in pain.

Although this society pays cursory attention to young women in trouble, the everyday experience of most young women—the vast numbers who successfully negotiate the adolescent experience—remains invisible because we are not paying attention. Many young women lose or give up their voices because they correctly perceive that we are not listening.



A curriculum for all young women

This curriculum is designed to help young women understand some of the structural forces that present them with risk factors and to increase their ability to make better choices in the face of those risks. In other words, *young women are not the problem*. The problem is a society which does not always value and nurture them. Our challenge as adults is to help them face those risks by drawing on their personal strengths and by providing a network of caring and support. Therefore, the purpose of this curriculum is not just to help young women who have been identified as having difficulties or who are already in trouble; it is also to enhance the lives and relationships of young women who are, so far, doing well. Information about the issues that effect them, as well as opportunities to talk, listen, reflect, think critically, plan and problem-solve, should be the birthright of all young women coming of age in this society.

Women's culture

One of the valuable aspects of our current culture is that there are more resources available to adult women than ever before. Since the advent of the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women have formed structured and accessible support groups to think, talk and strategize about what it means to live as women, as women of color, as poor and working class women, as mothers, as community activists, and as friends. The alternative presses and electronic media make it possible to access vast amounts of information about women's lives and organizing activities. As just one example, women have become writers, editors and publishers, able to communicate directly and widely to other women, organizing themselves along lines of mutual interest and concern. For instance, groups such as Kitchen Table Press gave voice to a range of experiences and issues central to the lives of women of color. Organizations, newsletters and conferences focused on women's health issues enabled many more women to have access to information about taking care of themselves. Networks of battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers and child assault prevention programs have enabled many women to escape from dangerous situations, to heal from past violence, and to advocate for women's safety.

What about younger women?

In general, younger women have not had the same opportunities. Therefore culturally, we are just beginning to see what a force



young women can be when given the support and resources they need. For example, young women are starting to take film writing, editing and production into their own hands giving us rare glimpses into the lives of young women dealing with relationships among women and between women and men, and with parenting, school, inward-directed violence and poverty.

Women musicians, rappers, singer-songwriters, and spoken word performers also give voice to young women's experiences, especially about the struggles of living in urban environments. An important part of our work with young women is to help them connect with the cultural productions of other women—young and old—who represent what they believe in and stand for. Videos, movies, songs, books and magazines—especially those by young women—are all valuable resources which can be integrated in this curriculum.

Why a group?

Women have historically built alliances with other women by telling their stories to one another. A woman seeks information by finding someone with whom she can share her thoughts, feelings and experiences. A group provides a structured experience so that together young women can develop common language for describing and thus understanding their lives. In a group setting, we can enhance a young woman's ability to speak for herself to her peers. In an open forum, young women can figure out how to solve the problems they face and to create the world in which they want to live. Through a group process we can encourage the sharing ideas and strategies for dealing with social pressures.

Many theories of identity development based on the male experience (or at least on men's interpretation of the male experience) emphasize the importance of self-definition, autonomy and self-reliance—of finding oneself, usually by oneself. The separation of the adolescent from family and friends is stressed. Recent research has demonstrated the key role of relationship to other people in the growth and maturation of adolescent girls. (We believe this to be true for boys as well as girls.) We know that for young women, the development of mutually empowering and empathic relationships is the basis for growth. Young women mature in relationship to others. Therefore it is crucial for a young woman to experience this curriculum in relationship to other young women, that is, in a group environment, rather than in an individual, one-on-one process.



Young people grow up and learn about the world by interacting with family, peers, school, and community. Reengaging young women in social relationships with the emphases on mutually supportive interaction and critical reflection enables them to establish the basis for healthy relationships and community involvement. These sessions will help young women develop growth strategies by encouraging them to build alliances with other members of the group.

Your Role as Facilitator

Preparing Yourself

As a group leader you have a responsibility to create a safe environment that supports the growth of all young people without regard to their immigration status, physical ability, sexual orientation, skin color or religion. In fact, your role is to redefine these often stigmatized differences as valuable assets to the program.

You must act from your hopes, not your fears, fully believing that young women are powerful. Your role is to recognize their talents, acknowledge their efforts and appreciate them for their survival. Before facilitating this curriculum, explore your thoughts, feelings, and assumptions about young women so that you can recognize, confront, and help change prejudices.

Do you find yourself holding specific expectations for young women based on their appearances, ethnic or class background?

How might stereotypes of young women as seen on TV, in the news, or in movies come between you and the young women you work with?

In the organization in which you work, do staff make negative comments about young women in general or about particular young women? If so, how might these comments and attitudes affect your work with young women? Are you able to confront *your* peers and respectfully challenge their stereotypes of young women?

How might your life experiences affect your work with young women?



If You Are a Woman

The challenge for female facilitators is to assist young women in loving who they are. You are better able to do this if you have healed your own wounds.

How kind and gentle are you with your self? How critical? How comfortable are you with your appearance? How well do you take care of yourself? How well do you stand up for yourself and for other women in your work place? What do you do to interrupt any tendencies to put yourself down, or to criticize other women? Do you sometimes lack self-confidence in your work? Do you take care of your partner, children, friends, co-workers, parents—everyone but yourself? Are you trying to be a superwoman?

In spite of our valiant and ongoing efforts to be the best we can be, we all internalize unrealistic messages about what it means to be a successful woman. We call this “internalized sexism.” These messages may supplant our own ideas about who we are. All of the questions listed above reflect ways that women are taught to adopt external standards that can lead to harsh self-judgment and self-blame.

Dealing with your internalized sexism is important preparation for your role as group facilitator for two reasons. First, you need to avoid any tendency to blame young women either for who they are or for what they do and say. It is all too easy to dislike or distance yourself from young women who are large bodied, dark skinned, or not dressed well, or who talk loudly, are belligerent, defiant, uncooperative, self-destructive, or unresponsive. Any young woman who doesn't fit social expectations that say a girl should be pretty, nice, responsive, respectful (and therefore potentially successful) may trigger your internalized messages about the importance of being a “good girl,” or how “good girls” should look and act. If you succumb to these messages, you may judge or comment on a young woman's sexual behavior “for her own good.” Your judgments might center on sexual identity, body image, appearance, or attitude. Women have been trained to use these judgments to hold each other accountable for being the right kind of woman: not too sexy, not too butch, not too loud—one who treasures motherhood, but not at too young an age. In fact, you may have been assigned to manage a group of young women because you represent women who fit into present structures and expectations. If so, we're asking you to challenge that role and your internalized sexism.



Second, as an ally to young women you must interrupt internalized sexism when they are practicing it on themselves or each other. Most young women regularly hear societal messages that they are not pretty enough, not good enough, not smart enough, not creative enough, not strong enough. They internalize these sexist messages and learn that women are “less than” men. Internalization in turn leads to self-blame, despair, self-destructive behavior, and put-downs of and separation from other young women. You can hear these effects in young women’s silence or in the tentative way that many of them voice opinions with statements that begin, “This may be wrong but....” You can also hear them in the belligerence, acting out, and challenge to authority which some young women display. The effects are also quite noticeable in the way that young women put down one another or join in disparaging young women not in their group. Comments about the beauty, dress, attractiveness, or intelligence of other young women are often ways to compensate for internalized messages of inadequacy.

As facilitator, you must interrupt these messages and bring to consciousness the social and political processes by which girls and young women are fed such messages. From magazine ads to album covers to history textbooks and the evening news—we need to help young women understand the institutions that devalue women, youth, people of color, and other less powerful groups in our society. One way to do this is to focus attention on the industries and institutions most visible to young women and help them develop the skills to analyze the messages and policies that impact them. The recording, diet, pornography, and cosmetics industries all provide striking examples of institutions that produce messages which young women can analyze and reflect on.

If You Are a Man

We feel strongly that this work is best facilitated by women, particularly women who reflect the cultural/racial background of the young women in the group. Adult women provide role models that many younger women desperately need. Young women are more likely to open up to other women. Men may also not take seriously enough the danger young women face in their daily lives and relationships because of the lack of experience they have with sexism in general and male violence in particular. It is extremely important that men don’t jeopardize a young woman’s safety through poorly informed suggestions, advice or unconscious attitudes.

Having a male facilitator (or young men in the group) may inhibit female participants from speaking freely about highly personal or



sensitive issues. In addition, the presence of a man in the group may produce sexual tension—no matter how innocent—at a time when young women need to be concentrating on themselves. Women are more likely to provide the safety that makes a group valuable for young women.

Adult female facilitators will experience the same challenges and issues, though in different ways, that male facilitators will. But sexism and the intense, heterosexual emphasis in our society increases the likelihood that a male presence will be the greatest distraction in a young women's group. While not all female facilitators will handle these challenges well, they will at least have a grounding in their own experiences as women.

If no women are available to do this work, then the male facilitator needs to keep the following points in mind:

It is easy for a man to become the center of attention in a group of women. It will take extra effort to insure that the center of attention always stays on the young women.

The sexual issues that arise, may be made more difficult by the presence of young women who are survivors of molestation and sexual assault.

Some young women are eager to establish a positive relationship with men but may not know how to do that. They may have been taught to use their sexuality, compliance, politeness, or friendliness to gain male attention. They may have learned to defer to men or to hide their real intelligence, their anger, or other key aspects of themselves when adult males are around.

Your sensitivity to these patterns, and your active steps to encourage clear and direct communication within the group, can help young women change these patterns.

Establish and maintain clear boundaries around verbal and physical interactions. For some young women, Male approval may be their only source of legitimation. Encourage them to find, accept, and trust approval from one another and other women.

You'll bring our own male-gender training and expectations of women into our work. You'll need to understand this training and set of expectations clearly so that they will not interfere in your work with young women. For a greater understanding of the core issues men face, we recommend *Men's Work* by Paul Kivel.



Facilitating a Group with Young Women

It's Not Therapy

A group is a gathering of people going through a process together. The process may have therapeutic elements, but therapy is not the goal.

You can expect that the young women who come to you or are sent to you, particularly if they are sent unwillingly, or have previously been identified as “problems”, will have some preconceptions about what this group is for and will be resistant to your authority. They will have been lectured, counseled, or advised “for their own good” by any number of adults. Many will have seen such a process as manipulative, and some will actually have been manipulated. For various other reasons they may be uncomfortable about paying attention to or expressing their feelings. Distrust of the process will increase that discomfort. Therefore, it's important for you to be clear about what this group is for.

The crucial task in this group is to create a safe place where young women can heal and grow and connect to their inner selves, to one another, and to the larger community. The goal is not individualized treatment or deep personal work for each member, but rather to educate and support the young women during the process of interacting with one another and the facilitator(s).

If the young women in your group are required to participate to fulfill a court order or as part of a treatment program, allow time for them to work through their feelings, including any resentment about having to attend. From the beginning, establish that they will be encouraged to notice and honor their own thoughts and feelings. As they begin to express their feelings, they will connect with you and the other participants, which will enable them to recognize deeper layers of feelings.

Denial of impact

Some young women will deny that they have been impacted even slightly by systematic treatment against women—sexism—in any form including gender-based violence. Resist the temptation to try and convince them that they have been. Remember that the curriculum is designed to assist young women in reflecting on their own experiences, in listening to the experiences of other young women, and in looking at the social structure in which we live.

For some young women the feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness that arise from acknowledging sexism can be



overwhelming. Their denial is a survival strategy (resistance for survival)—the best they have at the time. When they begin to see other choices (with the support of the group), they will develop new coping and survival skills to replace unproductive ones. Other young women may live in quite protected families or communities or be too young to have been exposed to significant prejudice, harassment or abuse. They also need a chance to reflect on their own experiences in the larger context of listening to other young women talk about theirs.

Trust

Trust will develop in the group if you are honest, consistent and reliable. **Young Women’s Lives** is designed to open conversations about subjects that are difficult to discuss. Many issues have a high emotional charge. It is important that an atmosphere of safety be created so that every participant can sort out and express her thoughts, feelings and experiences.

If you are working with young women who have experienced high levels of disappointment, you can expect trust to build slowly, or to build quickly and then disappear at the slightest perception of dishonesty or lack of candor. Some young women have been abused so severely or so often that you won’t be able to build enough trust to overcome their history. Such young women need a level of healing, support and consistency that is beyond the scope of this curriculum.

Participation

Listening is one of the most profound gifts we can give to one another. As the group dynamic develops, watch for and plan to deal with individuals who dominate time in the group. Ways of structuring the time so that each young woman has a fair opportunity to express herself to the group include

- using a timer
- breaking down into pairs
- asking each person in the circle to respond to the same question. (The right to pass always applies. No one should be pressured to respond.)

Homophobia

One in four gay and lesbian youths are forced to leave home because of conflicts with their families about being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. LGBT youth constitute up to 25% of all



youths living on the streets in the U.S., and they make up approximately one third of all teen suicides.

Homophobia is the fear and hatred of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and people who are gender nonconforming. Homophobia exists in and perpetuates a climate of ignorance, intolerance, and abuse that is devastating to LGBT youth. Such a climate also affects young women who challenge traditional ideas of what it means to be a woman. They are sometimes accused of lesbianism and are left feeling demeaned and abused. Young women who question their sexuality get clear messages that loving another woman is unnatural. Homophobia can prevent young women from forming close and supportive relationships with each other and can pressure them into entering or staying in unwanted relationships with men as proof of their heterosexual identity. Homophobia impacts relationships among all women. “Women seem more able to support one another’s painful experiences than to join one another in pleasure: being able to support a full range of feelings, including honesty, passion, creativity, joy, jealousy, and anger is much more difficult” (Taylor et. al. p.96).

You can assume that of the young women you encounter, some will be lesbian or bisexual, some will be heterosexual, and some will be unsure about their sexual identity. As strong allies to young women we must respect every participant’s right to safety. Young lesbians, bisexuals, and gender nonconforming young women need and deserve support and nurturing. Because they are challenging stereotyped expectations for girls and women, often receiving much abuse in the process, they are at even higher risk of suicide and other self destructive behavior. They may also become victims of hate crimes.

What You Can Do

As facilitator you set the tone for the group. You can negotiate with participants about language, but *basic respect is non-negotiable*. Any labeling—including racial, sexual, and homophobic put-downs—should be met with reminders about the Agreements (see below). If such comments continue, it would be advisable to spend time exploring why group members are violating their own agreements. Use the young women’s own experiences to explore the consequences of breaking agreements such as “no put-downs”, “no judgment”, and “confidentiality”. Then ask for a recommitment to the agreements, and to group accountability.



Names

Call group members by the names they want to be called. Refer to group members in general as young women rather than girls so that you don't inadvertently diminish or trivialize their experience.

Respect and Pride

To encourage group members to act with pride and self-respect, *you will need to show complete and unreserved respect for each one of them*, even if they mess up, act out or break the agreements. Avoid the temptation to joke about or put down any group member. It is important to separate the person from her actions and to completely all participants.

In addition, call on and build group members' sense of pride by inviting them to talk about what they are proud of, and what they've accomplished during the sessions. Give them verbal appreciation for what they do and allow them to reflect on what gets in the way of their believing in themselves. Encourage pride in how they take care of others and in how they take care of themselves. Remember that even small steps deserve notice and appreciation, because each step taken makes possible the next one.

The Agreements

An important part of our work is creating a safe place for young women to heal from the effects of discrimination, rejection, exclusion, and violence. The group weaves a fabric of place, time, and relationship that provides warmth and shelter for each young woman. Each group member participates for herself and for the others.

We have found that the group agreements are an effective tool for establishing ways that the young women in the group will communicate with one another and with you—ways that may differ greatly from how they have learned to be together with other young women. *Just making and keeping these agreements with one another may be the most important purpose and work of the group.* They provide the beginning of a paradigm shift—a vision of a different way to relate to others. They also give group members the opportunity to practice breaking down patterns of separation, judgment, disapproval, and attack. Notice that the agreements prohibit physical or emotional put-downs. They call for confidentiality and require all members to speak for themselves using "I" statements. (This teaches participants to own their unique experiences and value the experiences of others.) The agreements help ensure that everyone in the group will be treated respectfully,



that everyone will be able to set her own limits, and that each will share responsibility for respecting everyone else.

Authority

Many young women have experienced authority as abusive. Some young women will see the agreements as just another set of adult rules. These young women may see attending the group as punishment for having acted badly, or may break the rules to confirm that they are as “bad” as they think they are.

As an adult, you’ll find it easy to slip, unknowingly, into using the agreements as rules, with penalties for breaking them that range from reprimands and shaming to expulsion. This is most likely to happen when things seem, to you at least, out of control. These are the times when you’ll need to remind yourself, and everyone else in the group, that these are *agreements* and that everyone in the group has a stake in keeping them.

Be open, clear, and consistent about what is and is not okay in the group and what will happen when someone does something that’s not okay. Make sure the agreements and consequences for not adhering to them are clear to group members. Explain anything that is not clear to them. Negotiate what’s not acceptable. When you experience confrontation, manipulation, or threats you can always ask, “What’s up?” Be prepared to listen closely to and to take into account their responses.

The challenge of leadership is to use your authority as facilitator to insist that every participant be able to feel safe and welcome without getting into power struggles and without giving up on any members of the group. Model consistency and firmness. Don’t express your authority arbitrarily. Instead, announce the group limits—and your limits—and keep to them. Infraction of the limits does not mean retribution or punishment, but it can mean that you will have agreed-upon and understood sanctions.

Some young women have discovered that one way to receive serious attention from adults is to rebel against authority or to rebel against the expectations that they be nice and polite and smile a lot, or to do both. These *adult* patterns of attention and discipline are worth discussing with the group. It is also important that you respond to all the young women in the group regardless of how outspoken they are. They will soon learn that, at least in this group, they don’t need to challenge your authority to get your attention.



Finally, examine your own feelings about having authority and about previous experiences of being manipulated by authority. Depending upon your experiences, you might find yourself wanting to pretend you don't have it, or making a show of giving it away. You might use authority out of fear of the young women. Or you might use it unintentionally to discriminate against members of the group whom you are less comfortable with. The best you can do is prepare yourself by looking at your own experiences and role-playing with other staff members worst-case scenarios of confrontation, manipulation, or threats. If you are clear, fair and consistent, young women will usually honor your authority.

You may be facilitating this group in a highly authoritarian institution which does not encourage young women to express themselves. If you're a woman, your own authority may be sharply diminished, or challenged, within such an environment. You may well have a lot of practice dealing with the same kind of adult male authority that the young women in the group struggle to resist. To encourage their voices, you may have to challenge your own lack of authority within that institution. In one institution we worked with, the adult women had come together to start a young women's program. They received so much harassment and sabotage from men in authority that their own survival as a group had to become the first focus of their attention.

Using your own struggles with authority will help you to empathize with young women who are struggling with your power and with that of the institution. Let the young women know about any struggles you are engaged in with authorities to create time, place, support and resources for them. Share with them what you know about the realities of institutional power and authority, and tell them about successful and unsuccessful strategies you and others have used to resist and organize against such power.

Seeing Them Through

The presence of a consistent, caring adult gives young women safety to explore complex issues and build strong positive connections with other young women. But committing to a group—especially when that group is meeting about problems or topics that might involve emotional vulnerability—is difficult. As discussed above, some young women will resist making such a commitment by trying to undermine your efforts. Others may resist by withdrawing emotionally from the group, by being silent or inactive, or by coming in late, leaving early, or dropping out. You may find it especially difficult to respond to these more indirect patterns of resistance.



The best response you can have is to understand these actions for what they are—survival strategies that may have worked for a young woman in the past. Keep yourself from blaming the young women, but be clear about holding them to the agreements. It’s always appropriate to ask a young woman doing any of these things, “What’s up?” Take her replies seriously (while realizing that, for her own safety, she might not be able to tell you everything that affects her decisions about her participation in the group).

A group stands or falls based on how well its members are able to bring up how they’re feeling about the process. You may hear reflections about what you’re doing, even if they are critical, that will help you and the group go forward. Remember that adapting the group process to the needs of the group members is always more important than sticking to the curriculum. Young women will gain more from working out for themselves what will meet their needs than they will from plowing through the material. Honor the agreements, trust the process, and keep breathing.

Dealing with Intense Emotion

Young women have full, deep, rich and complex emotional lives. However, despite assumptions that they are emotionally expressive, many young women have neither extensive vocabularies for emotions and feelings, nor the security, experience, or cultural sanction to express what they feel. Most young women are also trained to maintain relationships with others, often at the expense of their own integrity and inner wisdom. Therefore, especially when their feelings might be interpreted as critical of other people, young women may have inhibitions about expressing themselves. Talking with the group about how to express feelings respectfully, using “I feel” statements, and keeping to the agreements will help to create an atmosphere in which it is expected that young women can express themselves and can take care of one another.

For some young women, expressing the anger they feel at those who have hurt them or at those whom they are in relationships with may be particularly difficult. In addition, many young women don’t have any models of adult women who can express their anger clearly and directly. The media, however, provide many models of “safer” ways to communicate. These methods—which may involve indirectness, manipulation, or sarcasm—leave the communicator with unresolved issues because her feelings have been neither expressed nor heard. Consider questions such as the following:



- How good are you at expressing anger in direct, responsible ways?
- What makes you uncomfortable when hearing other women's anger?
- How might you try to smooth things over, downplay the strength of the anger, or focus on other feelings?

Young women have much to be angry about. Anger is a normal response to injustice, pain, anguish and disrespect. Encouraging the full expression of young women's anger will allow them to feel both their pain and their righteous power and lead them to solutions to their problems individually and collectively. It makes it less likely that they will self-destruct and more likely they will construct answers to their problems.

The degree of safety needed for deep emotional work will be determined to a great extent by your level of comfort. If you are not prepared to deal with the strong feelings evoked in you by strong feelings in someone else, young women may not express their strong feelings or, when expressed, they will not likely be expressed in the group or, when expressed, they will be diverted, reinterpreted, or smoothed over.

In general, women and men are taught to value different emotions and to express emotions differently. It is also true that people from different ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and family groups learn different ways of dealing with feelings. One group may value talking a lot, while another may value silence; one may value anger, another stoicism; members of one group may engage by looking one another in the eyes, members of another by looking down or away. All cultures vary in what is appropriate for one person to disclose to another. Group norms in our society often unconsciously reinforce the values of the mainstream, such as making eye-to-eye contact, talking about feelings, making direct statements, disregarding the effect of one's statements on others. You will have to practice making room for cultural differences. Talk with adults from the cultural, racial and socio-economic groups represented among your group members to learn more about their cultural norms. Cofacilitate whenever possible with adult women from other ethnic groups.

Remember, the purpose of this group is not to have or express feelings. The purpose is to get young women to become aware of their feelings, to notice how their feelings affect their actions, and to learn new options for acting powerfully and responsibly based on those feelings.



Encouraging Closeness

When young women can see themselves and one another as sources of support, as positive reflections, as affirmations of power and intelligence they can build close and effective alliances that reduce the impact of violence in their lives. Young women may choose to forego closeness. Relationships may be maintained superficially, and safely, without one's truer feelings being expressed. Or, relationships may be abandoned because honesty doesn't feel possible. To maintain a relationship, most young women feel compelled to compromise their own truth. When this happens, young women aren't able to experience deep, intimate, complex and sustained connection with others. This may lead them to become strong within but isolated from others or connected with others but with less sense of self. The ability to be strong *and* close is an important skill for member to develop within the group. This ability will also serve them well as adults. Encouraging the young women to pay attention to their relationships with other group members and to work out conflicts will foster their maturity.

Group Closure

Closure provides the opportunity to celebrate young women's successes. For some young women, having attended most of the sessions will mean success. Others will have participated significantly and perhaps have made major changes in their life. Closure needs to recognize the progress each young woman has made in relation to where she started when the group began. Acknowledging each group member's success is important. Such acknowledgment encourages each young women to build on her newfound awareness and skills long after the last session has ended.

The young women will react in various ways to completing the group. Many have only experienced endings as abrupt, abusive, unsatisfying, and often even unacknowledged.

Spend some time thinking about your closing. Begin acknowledging the closing several sessions ahead of time. Make time for young women to reflect on what they have done together, what their next steps will be, and what it might be like for them without the group. What commitments would they like to make with other people and with one another for the near future? Try to keep these realistic to maximize the possibility of successful follow-through. Above all, make sure each group member is acknowledged by everyone for whatever way she has chosen to participate in the group. A strong clear ending emphasizes the group members' power to act positively outside of the group.



Your closure

Think about your own need for closure with each group you complete. How do you want to say good-bye to the young women? Outside of the group, how will you mark the completion of the group cycle? In what ways will you evaluate what worked and what didn't? Who will you talk with about the group? Decide how you will celebrate the work, energy, time and creativity you put into making the group happen. You enabled the young women to come together and, at least for a time, have a vision of what a caring, supportive and inspiring women's circle can be like. Even if only briefly, honor yourself for supporting young women's personal development and strengthening their community.

What-Ifs

Now that you have looked at some of the general issues involved in working with young women, let's examine some of the special issues. Some concerns may be based on who the young women are, why they come to the group, and who you are. We don't attempt to cover all possible issues but want to remind you to adapt the curriculum to the needs of the group. Let the young women define how the sessions have to be modified to take into account their specific needs.

Age

These materials are specifically designed for young women between the ages of fourteen and nineteen. We have found them useful for younger girls and older youth with some modifications. The age(s) of the youth you work with will determine some of the mechanics of the group, such as how long the sessions can be (shorter for younger women), how many physical activities and breaks you might need to build into the group process, and how long you can spend on any one topic.

Some exercises will have to be modified for younger women because they have had fewer experiences.

Don't underestimate the knowledge young women have, through the media and through their actual experience, to difficult issues that you might not have been exposed to until much later in your own youth. And don't overestimate their ability to handle difficult life experiences even if they have had lots of them. The more you work with young women of a particular age group and from a particular community, the more you will be able to adapt the material to them.



Race

Race is an issue that affects almost every aspect of our lives in this country regardless of our racial identity. This fact is transparently obvious to all people of color and largely

invisible or “normalized” for white people. Your understanding of racism and your ability to help young women navigate its treacherous waters will be profoundly affected by your own ethnic/racial identity, and by your preparedness for dealing boldly with this issue. Your feelings and experiences of race and racism will likely interfere with your ability to be present with the young women unless you do some work on your own first. For those of you who are white we recommend Paul Kivel’s *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*; for people of color, we recommend Gloria Anzaldua’s *Making Face, Making Soul*.

Look at who is in your group....

If your group is Predominantly or Exclusively White Young Women

In many communities white students are in schools with few, if any, people of color. Those who attend schools with students of color often have little contact with them because of tracking, social segregation, or busing. The result is that most young white women and men learn about other ethnic groups primarily through books, sitcoms, movies, music, the evening news, or newspaper headlines. Additional information comes from family and friends who may themselves have little contact with people of color.

Part of understanding female training for white young women invariably means coming to grips with their training as *white* women. The standards by which white women prove they are ladies have traditionally been inextricably tied to contrasts with and separation from women of color.

In everyday conversations many white women don’t interrupt comments they hear which scapegoat women of color by pointing out that substantial numbers of white women are also poor, single heads of households, on welfare, prostitutes, or recent immigrants. Racial issues are largely unspoken, or referred to by using coded phrases such as “welfare mother”, “inner city”, “children having children”, and “illegal alien”. White women have often tried to justify equal opportunity for themselves by aligning with white men as upholders of civilization and bearers of the race



standard. Many young white women are being conditioned to expect access to white male privileges at the expense of their sisters of color. As a result, women in general lose out on what could be a powerful connection and solidarity.

One of the conditions of acceptance for many immigrant groups when they arrive in America is that if they give up their native languages, customs and values to assimilate, their members would be accepted as white. This has set up the misconception that white people don't have culture, and that people of color should give up their languages and traditions to become "American."

Subsequently job, housing and educational discrimination have been justified by saying that people of color don't talk right, don't act right, aren't qualified, or don't fit in.

Throughout this curriculum young women are encouraged to reflect on, and reconnect if necessary, with their cultural and racial heritages. Young white women can take these opportunities to look at their European American family backgrounds, enabling them to break down their misconceptions about having a nationality but no ethnic identity.

White women often hear messages from family, friends and the media that men of color are dangerous to them. In fact, sometimes the false message they hear is that the only thing that men of color really want is access to the bodies of white women. In truth, white women are many times more likely to be physically or sexually assaulted by white men they know—as family members, friends, dates, co-workers or lovers—than by men of color they don't know.

If your group is all white, race may not even be mentioned, except in an uncomfortable joke or veiled reference. Nonetheless you can assume that the issue is always present just below the surface. The main type of violence in an all-white community will be white on white. Even so, don't gloss over the "Who Am I?" session and other cultural/racial exercises because of a lack of women of color in your group. The success of white women at the expense of women of color is not acceptable. Cross-racial solidarity among young women is crucial for changing the conditions of all of their lives.

Predominantly or Exclusively Young Women of Color

Many institutions serve almost exclusively African American, Latino/a, Native American, or Asian American people. If your institution is predominantly run or staffed by white people, if your



group is for young women with “problems,” *and* if the young women in the group are mostly of color, you can be sure that discrimination is happening somewhere in your institution. You will have to deal with its effects in your group by addressing the anger group members of color feel towards the community and institutional practices that discriminate against them.

Any adult, regardless of ethnicity, might be reluctant to venture into a discussion of racism with a group that is predominantly youth of color. Some of this may be the result of racism—the implicit belief that this group is more “dangerous” than others. Well meaning adults may also fear that youth of color will use acknowledgment of racism as an excuse for rage, apathy, or hopelessness, or as a reason to strike out. Just the reverse is usually true. It is a relief to young people of color to have racism acknowledged. For them, a healthy response to racism *includes* refusing to take full responsibility for making better choices unless they can discuss and analyze the constraints on their lives and communities. Young women of color have inevitably developed strategies of survival for dealing with the violence that racism brings into their lives. They will remain unable to transform these strategies into strategies of resistance and liberation unless they are able to talk about and analyze the effects of racism on them and on the communities of which they are a part.

In these groups, set aside structured time for young women of color to voice their concerns, anger, fears, and hopes. Invite the white young women (if there are any in the group) to listen carefully. Ask them to notice when they get scared, angry, or want to deny what the young women of color are saying. Remind everyone in the group that the young white women are not responsible for the institutional violence young of color have been targeted with in the past. This is an opportunity to examine racism and its different effects on the lives of group members.

Without a good understanding of racism, young women of color will not understand the dynamic in which the powerlessness, fear, and anger they feel about racism are turned into violence against their peers and themselves. They have learned the same stereotypes about themselves that white youth have learned about them. You may be surprised to hear how deeply these messages of hopelessness and distrust of others have set in. For young women of color who come from families where racial pride and the discussion of racism have given them tools for responding to the violence of racism, the group can provide a time to value the



teachings passed on to them by family members and community traditions.

Pay special attention to issues of race in the sections dealing with body image and beauty. The dominant standards for women's appearance are Euro-centric (even the women of color portrayed in the media usually have light skin and "European" facial features) and emphasize the tall, blond, blue-eyed, thin Nordic look. Face with these messages, many young women of color have difficulty feeling self assured, beautiful and powerful in their bodies.

In addition, each group member of color will need to hear the experiences of group members of other ethnicities. One way that racism works is by pitting one group against another. These exchanges are not an occasion to figure out who has it the worst; rather they are opportunities to discover how each individual and group can be the best possible ally for the others.

Women have always built cross-racial alliances and coalitions. They have needed to do this for support, to build resistance, and to create new opportunities and community projects. The young women in your group probably do not have information about this "herstory," but they can begin to establish or affirm these ties through their own relationships.

Racism is always difficult to bring up in a society that denies its profound effect on all our lives. When we, as adult facilitators, create some safety for young women of any race to talk about racism we have indeed become their allies.

Economic Class

Economic issues are rarely talked about in relation to young women but they are clearly at the core of their lives. Having enough money to buy what they need; becoming financially self-supporting; financing educational, training, travel and job opportunities; and providing for themselves and any children they might choose to have are all central economic considerations. Young women in the United States grow up in a society that expects them to work *and* raise children, yet places serious limits on job opportunities, pay, and their ability to achieve success. Support, but scant resources, exists for maternity leave, parenting skills, child care, housing and job training—all factors which could increase their opportunities.

In addition, young women are constantly exposed to images of lifestyles far beyond what most of them can realistically expect to



achieve. Most young people live in neighborhoods and go to schools segregated by socioeconomic class. However, because money makes such a difference in young people's lives, even small differences in economic resources and opportunity among them can produce a variety of feelings including anger, frustration, despair, resentment, and violence. Young women are often the recipients of the pain, anger, frustration and violence that young men in their communities pass on because of their own lack of economic opportunity.

How much do you know about the economic circumstances of the community from which the youth in your group come? Ask yourself the following questions.

What effects do unemployment rates, the kind of jobs available, and the standards of living in this community have on the way violence is acted out among young men and women?

What job opportunities are there for young women in this community?

What adult female models of economic success do young women see around them?

How is the economic success of young women tied to the men in their families of origin, or to the men some of them may relate to as future partners?

Members of wealthier communities live in private homes and have access to lawyers, therapists and doctors—resources which allow them to keep violence private, out of the public eye. When working in an affluent community remember that “hidden” violence, such as drug use, battering of partners and children, child sexual abuse, and suicide, is no less damaging than the more public forms of violence that young women may experience, such as sexual harassment and rape.

In any community, whether wealthy, middle-class, working class, or poor, the tendency is to perceive violence and lack of opportunity as a problem of “those people,” or groups with less power than the majority. These groups are usually poorer, darker skinned, more recent immigrants, or less educated than the rest of the community. Such stereotyping is itself a form of violence, dividing people from one another, silencing victims of violence, and giving license to the forms of violence common in the community.



One effect of such stereotyping may be that your group comprises young women of lower socioeconomic. You may, for example, have been sent the poorer or working-class young women in the community who have been labeled the “problem.” Here again, your work is to ignore the labels and help young people address any class issues that divide them from one another.

**Tailoring Your Group to the Community:
Rural/Urban/Suburban**

Some truths about young women’s lives cross all gender, race, and class lines, but there are often helpful distinctions to be made based on the community in which you’re working. For example, young women in rural areas often have few age-appropriate community services to turn to. Limited work opportunities, isolation, and poverty may trap many young women into early childbearing or to become trapped in abusive situations. Such hardships may make moving to a city seem attractive and may prevent youths from attempting to build community where they are. This can be unfortunate because pride in the land and the history of an area can help young people develop a strong sense of community. Cultivating responsibility to a community is a crucial skill in stopping violence.

Urban environments generally offer more youth services than do rural environments, but they also leave young people vulnerable to street and neighborhood violence. Larger school systems, unlike many smaller systems, tend to provide students with a greater variety of teaching materials and subjects, better access to information, and much diversity among peers and teachers. But more students get lost in the larger systems than in the smaller systems, and they are more likely to confront such dangers as drug dealing and weapons violence than students from rural areas.

In the suburbs young women face yet another set of problems: few places for young people to gather, economic segregation and isolation, high rates of invisible family violence, and the disruptions of family life caused by parents with mobile personal and professional lives. They may have learned to deny or gloss over the real problems they face to keep up appearances. If so, one of your tasks will be to help them break through this denial.

All young women need to discuss the issues presented in this curriculum, but the context for this discussion is always the community they live in—how it fits, how it’s different, and what must be done here.



Immigrants and Refugees

If you are working with young women who have recently immigrated to your community from another country, you will need to understand some of the violence they face in the form of stereotypes and prejudices held by more established community groups. Community services are not often set up to aid immigrant victims of violence. Also, many recent immigrants are refugees who have come from countries where they faced extreme violence—war, rape, torture, forced relocation, assassination, and extortion. Their first need may be to deal with such previous experiences of violence, and there may be few resources available to them.

Immigrant women who speak a limited amount of English, lack job skills, or are without legal papers are more likely to be exploited at work, or battered and sexually assaulted at home or in relationships. These young women have few legal recourses and are vulnerable to deportation if attention is brought to their affairs.

Young women who were born in the United States but are members of immigrant communities have a different set of constraints. They may have to act as mediators between their families and community services, and they may face severe dissonance between the traditional expectations of women in their communities and the opportunities presented to them by the larger society. Understanding how these issues are real in the lives of your group members is essential to helping them understand and respond to the root causes of violence in their lives.

You may also have to help group members for whom English is a second language understand the materials and participate fully in the discussions. Arrangements for translation of the materials or interpreters for group members who do not speak English. Young immigrant women may need help finding their voices within the group. They may also have different cultural styles, different levels of comfort with public discussion of personal issues, and fears about public participation that are different from those of nonimmigrant youths. Cofacilitate with or at least talk with adult community members from the cultures represented in the group when possible. Always make time for young women to speak up for themselves within the larger group discussion—the earlier in the curriculum the better. Use process techniques (such as a “go-around” in which everyone speaks in turn) to ensure that young women from cultures where they are not encouraged to speak up have a chance to participate fully.



Teen Mothers

If you are working with a group of teen mothers you will have to adapt the material to meet their needs both practically and emotionally. Bonding within the group can be facilitated by

having the young women share pictures of their children, and share their stories, frustrations, fears, and hopes. Such sharing can set a foundation for discussing more difficult issues.

Being a young mother is not inherently positive or negative. It depends on the young woman, her maturity, the support, options and resources in the community that are available to her. For some young women, having a child brings a newfound focus, vitality, dedication, and responsibility. For others, it brings depression, inability to cope, and self-destructive or abusive behavior. Your job as facilitator is to allow each young mother the opportunity to participate fully, without judgment, in a group process which will enhance her ability to thrive under challenging circumstances. At the same time we must acknowledge the attacks on and scapegoating of young mothers that continue in the media, in public policy, and in education and economic development. Counter to this are the efforts in many communities to address issues of welfare, child support, affordable child care, job training, continuing education and economic opportunity. Connecting young mothers to resources in their community—and to the grassroots struggles for economic and social justice related to their situations—increases their life opportunities and strengthen the community.

Whether pregnancy was intentional or unintentional, becoming a mother has many different meanings for young women. We should make no assumptions about the meaning or impact of becoming a mother on a young woman. We can create a safe, nonjudgmental place where she can explore these issues with us.

Some young mothers were molested as girls. Others were impregnated by men significantly older than them. Some young women become pregnant as a result of sexual assault. When motherhood results from factors related to male violence, there can be an additional layer of anger, grief, disappointment, fear and other feelings which young women need help sorting out. (In most states it is a crime for adults to be involved sexually with young women under 18. If you become aware of such an involvement, reporting issues may be involved.)



Young mothers also need practical support such as child care, baby supplies, and parenting information. A parenting class is a crucial supplement to this curriculum when used with young women who are mothers.

Drugs

Many of the young women in your group will have had at least some exposure to drugs but we can't make any assumptions about a young woman's drug use. Drugs—including alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, diet pills, sleeping pills, amphetamines, cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and various designer drugs—are part of the fabric of American life. Almost all young women are exposed to drugs and their use and many have experimented with one or more of them. Some young women clearly abuse drugs and some are addicted.

The topic of drug use has an obvious place in group discussions about women's lives. Drugs are often involved in self-destructive violence, vulnerability to violence from men, and the numbing of pain, despair and anger. It's likely that most young women have been exposed to alcohol and other drug prevention programs through the school or community. Most young women will have developed a wide range of personal strategies for responding to the presence and availability of drugs.

Young women need time and a safe space to explore the topics of drug use and abuse; the pressures of living in a society where drugs are commonly abused; the effects of drugs on their family, friends, and community; and to ask for and receive the information they need to make good choices about their own lives. The curriculum offers several places where these issues can be raised and critical discussion initiated.

If you become aware that a young woman in your group is abusing drugs, you will need to initiate a discussion. Her work in the group (and perhaps that of other group members) can be undermined if she turns to alcohol and other drugs instead of to her allies or her inner strength. This curriculum does not address the fundamental dynamics of drug abuse. It can work effectively as part of a recovery program and we think the issues covered here are critical to addiction treatment, but this curriculum alone is not sufficient to deal with the range of issues related to substance abuse. Even if your group is not explicitly addressing recovery issues, you will nonetheless need to weigh the impact of drug use on your group and be prepared to discuss it knowledgeably.



Gangs

There are gangs of young women. Gangs provide protection, safety, connection, recognition, community, and respect for their members. When young women join gangs it can be because they feel locked out of other places—families, schools, and neighborhoods—that are expected to provide the support they need. They may also join out of fear, family tradition, or a lack of other options.

Many more young women live in neighborhoods where gangs are prevalent, have family or friends in gangs, or are in relationship with male friends who are gang members. These young women face increased danger from physical and sexual assault and random violence. They need help in sorting out their options and resources for staying safe.

This curriculum is not anti-gang members; it is pro-community. It is about helping young women find ways to be together based on pride, power, and protection without relying on fear, violence, constant competitiveness, or self-destructive behavior that gangs oftentimes foster.

Recent Self-destructive or Violent Incidents

In some institutions, this curriculum will be introduced after an incident of violence. It may have been an event such as a teen suicide, an interracial fight, a boyfriend beating up his girlfriend, young women fighting with each other, gang activity, or incidents of sexual assault or sexual harassment. Address self-destructive behavior and recent incidents of violence directly without blaming. Both are frightening for the young women involved and for others in the group. The curriculum offers times for group members to write about and discuss recent incidents of violence. Certain events or discussions may trigger strong emotional responses such as despair, fear, confusion, or rage. Healing from the effects of violence is important for each individual and can be a catalyst for young women to join together to stop violence.

Your willingness to deal with the fear and anxiety that comes up can create a healing environment for all member of the group. We each carry the seeds of desperation that can bloom into suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, or striking out at others. Continuing to include and treat with respect members who have been involved in these activities sends a statement to others in the group that you distinguish between people and their behavior. You let them know you hold people in high regard even when they



are not able to do so for themselves or others. You maintain that they are inherently worthy of love and acceptance; that you believe in their ability to reflect the positive qualities they came into the world with; and that you fully expect that, with support and assistance, they will regain control over self-defeating and self-destructive behavior.

If recent violence has resulted in a group member (or more than one) suffering from major trauma, you may need community counseling resources to help her heal from the events. In any case, run the group in the context of what is currently happening. Give group members a chance to talk about what is going on, how they feel, about how they want to support each other, and about how they can respond to violence.

Family Violence, Sexual Assault, Child Sexual Assault: Confidentiality and Reporting Laws

Physical and sexual abuse of young women is endemic in many of our communities. Even if you are in a school and community where there is little overt or public violence, be aware that some young women have been abused or involved recently in a self-destructive or violent episode. Be clear to group members that your first priority is their safety. If you become aware that someone is being abused, or if you believe that someone is planning to hurt herself or someone else, then you are by law mandated to report it. Tell the group members about your reporting requirements up front so that they know what you are required to do before they disclose any information. Young women cope with violence in many different ways. Group members may decide to get information from you by asking about the problems of a “friend of theirs.” Or they may decide to use the group directly as a place to sort out the details and discuss possible courses of action. Individuals can reap great benefit from the combined experience of group members.

Some young women will come to you outside the group with their stories of abuse. If you make it safe enough, young women will tell you what is happening to them. You should be prepared to respond and to work out an intervention where it is required. Learn the reporting requirements and procedures in your state. Discuss with your supervisor and other staff members how to respond to young women who are in abusive and dangerous situations. Make sure you have others adults you can confer with and get support from for this eventuality. Steer young women to appropriate resources for support and intervention, if necessary. If you work with young people, you are probably already aware that the response of official agencies such as child protection services is highly variable and



often arbitrary. Intervention can be in the best interest of the child and still be terribly destructive. The foster care system, legal system and other elements of institutional response are not to be relied on for consistent, caring attention to the needs of young people facing abusive situations. It may be important to help young women in trouble think about other, non-institutional resources such as extended family networks, friends, and community-based organizations in addition to whatever official resources are available.

When a group member tells her story publicly, the rest of the group is affected. It is difficult for anyone to expose herself as a victim of physical or sexual abuse. When witnessing this, other group members need a chance to talk about their own experiences of abuse. They may also want to figure out how to offer support. This is *not* a time to talk about, gossip about, or blame the person who has disclosed, it is a time to remind everyone of the agreements of confidentiality and of not judging others.

Other young women may deny the possibility that they could ever be victims of abuse. They may say, “I would just leave if a guy hit me!” Vulnerability to violence can be terrifying; denial is one way of dealing with the fear. Denial of their own vulnerability can also make young women critical of other young women who have been victims of violence. They may even blame the victims. In reality, no one is immune from sexual assault or physical attack. It is precisely when we want to separate ourselves from the survivors of violence that we need to see our common vulnerability and work to make the community safer for all of us. Understanding our common need for safety is an important component of this work.

On the other hand, breaking down young women’s survival strategies is not useful unless they are replaced by skills in getting help. You don’t want to make young women feel completely vulnerable and unable to survive. It is best for group members to listen to one another’s stories, talk about their feelings, and self-monitor their acceptance of the vulnerability to violence that young women must contend with. Self-defense classes are excellent ways for women to build up self-confidence and skills while accepting the realities of violence. *We strongly recommend that self-defense be taught to all young women for the great emotional and physical resiliency and responsiveness that such training provides in situations of danger. A good self-defense class is an excellent complement to this curriculum.*



Extreme violence

If you are working with young women, individually or in a group, who have experienced extreme violence—the murder of a close friend or family member, rape, child sexual assault, abandonment, long-term physical abuse, imprisonment as a refugee, or war—you can expect serious resistance, denial, and layers of self-protection. In most of these cases long-term individual therapy is called for to deal with the more severe symptoms which may include dissociation, personality splitting, hyperarousal, and terror. The material in these sessions can supplement, but not replace, the slow, painful healing necessary for recovery from the trauma caused by extreme violence.

A Final Note

You'll need to try to understand and to plan for the possibility that the conditions under which young women come to your group may prohibit the group from working. And the environment or the institution in which the group is being conducted may be so oppressive and anti-young woman that you cannot create enough safety for the group to work. Many schools, drug programs, juvenile detention halls, and other institutions where young women are congregated are more accustomed to criminalizing and punishing them than in helping them rebuild their lives. At the same time, some of the young women in your group may be so damaged by the violence they have experienced and the training they have received that they need longer term, more individualized help than this group can provide. It's important to expect as much as you can, but it is always appropriate to scale your goals to what is possible. Neither you nor the young women can be blamed for the group not working under such conditions.

It is doable. Together you can create a safe place where women can come together to heal from violence, to rebuild lives, to reestablish the web of community, and to challenge the status quo. You bring your skills, experiences, and best intentions. The young women bring their experiences, their resiliency, their intelligence, their survival skills, and often their subversive attitudes.

Advocates for young women

We have found that inevitably, running a program for young women means becoming an advocate for them within the institutions in which you work. In fact, advocating is one of the most important ways we can work for them as allies. Simply creating a time and a place for young women to get some attention



may put you up against entrenched practices that deny the value of young women's lives and that bring into question your own position in the organization. Young women will need your help to sort out the many issues and problems they face. Some of these will relate to specific policies and practices which put them at risk. Your job is to work with them to devise action plans for making changes. In addition, you will need to advocate for them in meetings, discussions, and planning and funding sessions to keep their needs visible, their voices heard, their lives addressed.

Adult Support

To work with young women and to be an effective advocate for them you will need adult support, both female and male, so that you don't become isolated within your organization or burn out with the responsibility and demands. Investigate the following:

- Who are the advocates for young women in the organization in which you work?
- Who among your supervisors, administrative staff, and co-workers can you count on for backup when challenges arise?
- Who can you turn to for support, listening, ideas, feedback and appreciation for the work you do?
- Who are the women in your community doing similar work?
- How can you structure regular time with the people you listed above?

Working with young women is wonderfully exciting, immensely satisfying, difficult, challenging, and absolutely crucial. At the same time, it is also underpaid, undersupported, undervalued, and underappreciated. We hope this curriculum will be a tool for making your work more effective. The authors are available to provide additional support, training and technical assistance for the important work you are doing on behalf of young women.

Follow-Up Activities

Below are some specific activities you could do as follow-up to the group activities.

1. Keep the group going as an informal discussion group directed by the young women.
2. Have a group reunion a month or two after the group stops.



3. Set up a community-service project that the group members can do together.
4. Ask the young women what they might like to do to continue the work they have started.
5. Turn the group into a violence-free relationships support group using curricular activities from *Helping Teens Stop Violence*.
6. Connect the young women with adult mentors to continue their support and growth.
7. Teach those who are ready to become peer educators or conflict resolution managers.
8. Establish office or visiting hours when the young women can come and talk with you on a regular basis.
9. Connect the young women to educational, job, and recreational opportunities.
10. Meet with other staff members to discuss what you've learned from the group to build more awareness of and organizational support for the needs of young women.
11. Start a new group and invite some of your graduates to participate as assistant leaders.
12. Show the "Young Women's Work" video to other groups of young women and ask your graduates to help lead discussions afterward.

Long-term work with young women is difficult for all of the reasons we discussed in the beginning of this guide. External pressures will continue to be at work in their lives. Approaching adulthood increases the pressure on each of them to be a "good" girl. Your continued presence in their lives, however, can provide a model of strength and support that they are hungry for, even if they can't always acknowledge or take advantage of it. More important, their presence in *one another's* lives can, over the long haul, create a community norm by which they can help one another and make changes in their lives and their community. You and your institution can foster those changes by making safe meeting or activity space available and by providing funding, further training, adult attention, jobs, and opportunities for continuing education.



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