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Sisters in Action for Power: How Youth-adult Partnerships and Popular Education can Facilitate Girl-led Community Organizing for Equity and Justice

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Abstract

Sisters in Action for Power: How Youth-adult Partnerships and Popular Education can Facilitate Girl-led Community Organizing for Equity and Justice examines how grassroots community organizing has impacted women of color in Portland, Oregon. Using a case study of the non-profit organization, Sisters in Action for Power, this paper addresses the question: how do women who were youth organizers with Sisters in Action relate to the broader significance and personal impact of the community organizing work they engaged in as youth? This paper offers three critical aspects of the practice of youth-adult partnerships at Sisters in Action: (1) civic engagement, (2) social capital, and (3) voice. My paper analyzes media coverage and in-depth interviews with women who were youth activists, and one adult facilitator with Sisters in Action. I do this to examine how girl-led, women of color-centered organizing through youth-adult partnerships and popular education infuse theories of radical political education into forming and deepening youth-adult partnerships.

Keywords: Sisters in Action for Power, youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs), activism, girl-led, popular education, civic engagement, social capital, voice, Black youth-led activism, narrative, girls of color, women of color


**Introduction**

Who do you talk to when you feel like you have experienced discrimination? Where do you go when you just want to be yourself? Who do you trust enough to be vulnerable around them? Well, if you were a young Black girl living in Portland, Oregon in the early 2000s, you might have chosen the staff and youth organizers at Sisters in Action for Power.

The problem I will be addressing is how Y-APs that were built in the context of learning grassroots community organizing skills affected girls of color who were leading campaigns with Sisters in Action in Portland, Oregon. The goal is to gain an understanding of what types of consciousness raising happened for the girls who were campaign participants, and in what ways involvement in this work impacted their understanding of society, social justice, and themselves. I am studying this topic because I want to know how, in the short- and long-term, this work affected the girls who participated and to find out what they saw as the significance of their work. A review of contemporary literature on youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) is the foundation for a case study on the non-profit organization, Sisters in Action for Power, and their campaigns for social justice and equity from year to year.

There were three themes of Y-APs within girl-led activism that helped me to understand the experiences of girls ages 10-17 during their time at Sisters in Action. During the process of reading literature on Y-APs, I was able to cull the following themes: (1) civic engagement, (2) social capital, and (3) voice (Ginwright, 2007, p. 404; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005, p. 43, p. 46; McNae, 2014, p. 274-276; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013, p. 385-386, p. 386-387).

**Motivation for the Study**

The contributions of girls and women of color in Portland’s history of social change actions are frequently unacknowledged. Black girls and women leading Sisters in Action’s political campaigns for equity have not been documented as instrumental activism in Portland. This paper is an effort to bring their work to light while entering the scholarly discourse on youth-adult partnerships.

![Figure 1: 22 August 2001, The Skanner; pictured members of Sisters in Action for Power celebrating their win over TriMet's creation of a new bus pass for low-income students.](image)

The beginning of the motivation for this study began with my observation that little is known about the many, varied, and successful grassroots political campaigns led by girls and women of color in Portland, Oregon. Initially, what sparked my interest was Sisters in Action’s transit justice campaign. This campaign, which began in 2001 and lasted four years, resulted in the victory of a new bus pass for low-income students. The accomplishments of this girl-led and women of color-centered organization continue to reverberate throughout the city. At the time of this writing, Portland Public School students are still using the bus pass. Figure 1 features members of Sisters in Action celebrating with community members, at Peninsula Park, the win of the new student bus pass. While narrowing the topic, I decided I wanted to know how participating in a successful transit justice campaign had affected the women who...
were youth organizers. However, during data collection and analysis, this research project began to take shape as the data (re)directed me to the ways in which Sisters in Action put theories of Y-APs and popular education into practice both internally with its members and externally with its political campaigns.

**Sisters in Action for Power: Social and Political Context**

North Portland was home to Sisters in Action for Power, until they permanently closed their doors around 2008. The girls of Sisters in Action planned and executed targeted political campaigns in response to issues identified by themselves and community members. To achieve this, they employed widely practiced community organizing strategies as taught to them by the adult women staff members. Thus creating Y-APs at their organization. The women and girls who were staff and members of this organization led community events and political campaigns ranging from transit justice, to safety, to police brutality, land rights, and housing insecurity. This was done in accordance with the organization’s mission “of developing the leadership, critical analysis, and community organizing skills of low-income girls and girls of color ages 10 through 18” (Pérez, 2007, p. 92). Figure 2 pictures some of the members of Sisters in Action at a rally to oppose local gentrification. The sign on the right reads: “A gentrifier a day forces low-income people away!”

Building Y-APs while doing community organizing work at Sisters in Action occurred within a particular social and political context. Various forms of oppression were prevalent in the girls’ lives: racism, sexism, and classism. 70% of the organization’s members were Black girls, who had direct contact with oppression in the forms of sexual harassment at school, insufficient or non-existent housing, living in food deserts, and the over-policing of their neighborhoods. Sisters in Action is a part of the legacy of Black youth-led activism. Historically, social and political change in the U.S. has been demanded and actualized by students. Similar to other groups, Sisters in Action had a wide membership base of mostly students and some community members. National examples include the very public successes and challenges faced by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Both of these groups are of the Civil Rights era, and both had a large contingent of active young Black women leaders. Locally, at Portland State University, we attribute the creation of our Black Studies department to a previous Black Student Union. For more current events we can look to our own local PFLAG Portland Black Chapter and Black Lives Matter Portland chapter to see just how young Black leaders are working toward equity, and the ultimate freedom, liberation, and self-determination of all Black people.

Figure 2: 2 July 2003, *The Portland Observer*; Photo of Amara Pérez (left), Director, and members of Sisters in Action for Power.

Figure 3: Sisters in Action for Power youth organizers at a 2002 anti-war protest in north Portland.
Figure 3 exemplifies one of the ways the girls at Sisters in Action were given opportunity to push back against normative expectation of political commitment and action by organizing people of color in north Portland for an anti-war protest. Pictured here are four youth from Sisters in Action enthusiastically practicing global citizenship (McNae, 2014, p. 271). As part of the framework used at Sisters in Action, girl organizers were given, “[a]ccess to resources and information within a democratic forum, a sense of belonging to a learning community,” (McNae, 2014, p. 273); thus preparing them as active civic participants who could operate as global citizens and confidently “talk back” to oppressors.

Youth-Adult Partnerships (Y-APs)

Many scholars agree without hesitation that there are benefits to building intergenerational unions in our communities through Y-APs. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is with the question of how youth respond to their circumstances and whether they make viable civic participants. Further complicating this discussion is the addition of the gendered and racialized lived experience of young girls of color in Y-APs, in this case, low-income Black girls.

The literature reflects fewer scholars engaging a discourse on Black youth participation in Y-APs, and even fewer on how young Black girls positively affect social change in their communities through intergenerational relationships. Some scholars are convinced that their peers ignore Black youth as a whole in regards to social change work. One scholar in particular, Shawn A. Ginwright (2007, 2010), former Director of Leadership Excellence in Oakland, California, and professor in the African Studies department at San Francisco State University. He maintains that systemic oppression forces Black youth to perform civic engagement actions that are not generally recognized by people who study Y-APs (Ginwright, 2007, p. 404; Ginwright, 2010, p. 80). I will advance the discussion by addressing not only the aspect of racialized subjugation, but also the gendered experiences occurring among young Black Y-AP participants.

Literature Review

The literature review presented here is non-comprehensive evaluation of contemporary writing on Y-APs. The focus will narrow to discuss Black youth civic engagement and community organizing, social capital, and voice.

Youth-Adult Partnerships Defined

Y-APs are a relatively new field of study, not appearing until the early 2000’s. On the surface, Y-APs read like a social gem: a tangible way to unite youth and adults to solve problems in our communities. However, the development of Y-APs is not without its own challenges. Leading Y-AP researchers and sociologists, Shepherd Zeldin, Brian D. Christens, and Jane L. Powers (2013),
identify three major barriers that stifle the progress of “theory building, research, and practice” of Y-APs: they are unfamiliar to people, conceptual challenges exist, and dissimilar definitions are used (p. 386).

The existence of a mutually beneficial partnership between the girl leaders of Sisters in Action and the adult women with whom they collaborate is an example of effective community organizing. Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2013) present their collective working definition of Y-APs as:
(a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue. (p. 388)

By this definition, Y-APs are advantageous to youth and adults alike. Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2013) definition of Y-APs can be applied to many forms of work that bring young people and adults together for the same causes (p. 388).

Rachel McNae, a scholar who researches and writes on youth-adult partnership, offers another definition of Y-APs in her 2014 article, “Activism and Community Engagement to Promote Girls and Women: To Have Voice and Choice,” she explores the concepts of voice and mindful dialogue between youth and adults who are working collaboratively. McNae (2014) writes that Y-APs “are relationships constructed in ways that encourage youth and adults to work together collaboratively in creating programs and taking action on issues of interest” (p. 277). The significance of these definitions is their apparent similarity; both McNae (2014) and Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2013) concur that Y-APs are co-created in a collaborative fashion and are focused on shared issues.

Themes of Youth-Adult Partnerships

I found three themes to be particularly salient and compelling in the context of the practice of Y-APs at Sisters in Action. The first, civic engagement, or how girls of color, specifically Black girls, perform public and/or community work. The second, social capital, or how the girls are granted access to resources and decision makers through their relationships to adults. Finally, voice – when and where do girls of color have a voice in politics, or even in community organizing? (Ginwright, 2007, p. 404; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, p. 43, p. 46; McNae, 2014, p. 274-276; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013, p. 385-387).

Scholars and community organizers have only recently put the development of Y-APs under a microscope. Ginwright (2010) offers a critical analysis of how Black youth participate in civic engagement, in his article, “Peace out to revolution! Activism among African American Youth.” Here, he pushes back on stereotypes of Black youth by using a historical analysis of Black people’s oppression in the U.S., including the ways institutional oppression has kept them out of the democratic process. The vision here is freedom and liberation, by way of creativity (Ginwright, 2010, p. 80). Where Ginwright’s (2010) analysis falls short is by pointedly not engaging a substantive gendered analysis (p. 78), as stated in his introduction.

Black feminist activists and scholars have long been writing in response, or talking b(l)ack, to their oppressors and documenting some of their own contributions to historical movements for freedom and liberation. Kathleen Neal Cleaver, activist turned lawyer – a young person herself when she joined the BPP and became the communications director – has written extensively on the Black/white binary division of labor in movement building and gendered dynamics of politics within the emergence of U.S. second wave feminism. Cleaver, writes in her 2003 article, “Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism,” that gender and racial oppressions are inextricably linked throughout
and when white feminists blatantly ignore this fact it does not endear Black women to the oppressive systems set upon them by the sexist and racist institutions.

Seeing herself within the legacy of Black women freedom fighters, Cleaver began to participate in the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s and continued into the 1970s and beyond (2003, p. 49). From the perspective of previous participation in Black women- and youth-led activism, Cleaver writes on an aspect of misogynoir (anti-Black misogyny) and erasure. Seven years after Cleaver published this article, Black woman scholar, Moya Bailey, coined the term misogynoir5. It is the fusion of patriarchy, racism, sexism, and anti-Blackness, as experienced by Black women, that defines this theoretical concept. On misogynoir and erasure, Cleaver states:

The visual record always documents the presence of women, but in the printed texts of academic accounts women’s participation tends to fade. Yet it was the women in the movement who insisted on the more radical approaches, showed the most determination, and kept the fires for radical change lit. (p. 49)

Cleaver’s quote is in direct reference to her first-hand account of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Still seemingly covert, yet widespread, sexist undertones persist in the more current events, direct actions, and organizing work of today. In a post-Civil Rights era we must take stock of the ways Black youth participate in society through so-called non-traditional forms of civic engagement (Ginwright, 2010, p. 80). Ginwright knows that, for Black youth, non-traditional avenues to activism are taken because of their marginalization within society (2010, p. 78).

Furthermore, we must consider the exclusionary practice of girls and women of color as active participants in civic duties.

My inclusion of the added layer of anti-Blackness and misogynoir impacts Ginwright’s (2010) point regarding the admonition of Black youth civic participation. Further, Ginwright maintains that adults facilitating the formation of critical consciousness in the youth they work with as tantamount to building Y-APs; on that account “activism among black young women emerges for both protection and resistance from these forms of domination” (p. 80). Ginwright’s gender analysis ends here; though it could be argued that when he later suggests intersectionality6 as a necessary tool of youth-led organizing we are to infer the author is including gender in his intersections. However, he does lend us a succinct point regarding the ways Black girls push back against oppression and their oppressors. It is often through direct-action activism that many Black women and girls engage in consciousness raising. Ginwright (2010) reminds us that our gratitude is to Black feminism/womanism for a solid critique on white supremacist institutions (p. 80).

Ginwright (2010) goes on to suggest that a focus on critical consciousness and intersectionality in youth-led organizing is a “departure from the standard social capital literature,” (p. 87). This standard tends to dismiss Black social rituals linked to survival and feelings of connectedness (Ginwright, 2010, p. 87). The essence of Ginwright’s argument asserts how essential it is to affirm Black youth social culture when analyzing the creative ways they strategize their activism and how to access social capital.

Social capital can be defined as “youth interactions with community adults” (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005, p. 46). This goes beyond superficial engagements that youth may have with adults and into ones that, ideally, propel their development into a place of mature discovery. In an intensive qualitative study of three youth programs Jarrett, Sullivan, and Watkins (2005) observed that youth would begin to view adults as allies when social capital is actualized in their lives (p. 52). A few major ways this happens, according to when 1) youth receive “access to information;” 2) youth learn the ins and outs of adult life and jobs through knowledge and exposure; and 3) having been exposed to information and examples, youth begin to consider their options (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005, p. 50-51). A Genuine and intentional foundation should be laid for youth-led organizations and/or programs to bring this aspect of the work to fruition. First, Y-APs
must have the three previously outlined elements if youth and adults are to build social capital together. In addition to forming intergenerational relationships with non-familial adults that are actively supportive (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005, p. 43), getting to this point is not without its challenges. The balance of power between youth and adults must be addressed (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005, p. 47). Without this, it becomes easy for adults in Y-APs to create inauthentic relationships with youth, and for the adults to reproduce oppressive dynamics.

Ginwright takes the Y-AP-based concept of social capital further in his assessment of how Black youth activists access social capital. In his 2007 article, “Black Youth Activism and the Role of Critical Social Capital in Black Community Organizations,” Ginwright posits that researchers need to exert “a nuanced understanding of how Black youth respond, resist, and work to transform school and community conditions” (p. 404). Jarrett, Sullivan, and Watkins (2005) use a one-size-fits-all model of social capital; framed in this way, the concept of social capital ignores youths’ experiences of systemic oppression. For the literature to change, social science researchers and Y-AP practitioners must unlearn the well-circulated negative images and assumptions they hold of Black youth. Here, Ginwright (2007) begins to use what he calls “critical social capital” (p. 404), as a concept to explain how Black youth make use of connections and relationships with adults to further their political agendas. Ginwright (2007) defines critical social capital as “connections to small community-based organizations in Black communities that foster political consciousness and prepare Black youth to address issues in their communities” (p. 404). Critical social capital can be used to help sustain an organization’s members “by reframing the discourse and negative perceptions of Black youth as civic problems...creating cultural pride and a strong racial identity...helping youth reframe personal issues as political issues” (Ginwright, 2007, p. 416). These are the ways Ginwright racializes the concept of social capital to better serve the efforts made by Black youth in their communities.

In the practice of Y-APs, the girls’ voices must be fully incorporated, and adults must have a genuine stake in the leadership development of the youth they work with. It is necessary that the inclusion of the girls’ voices go beyond essentialism and tokenization (McNae, 2014, p. 276). This inclusion can be created through the formation of democratic spaces (McNae, 2014, p. 269), using open and honest dialogue to build trust and healthy relationships. McNae (2014) notes, that to produce a successful youth-led Y-AP, the youth and adults must be in continuous dialogue with one another (p. 276). Additionally, it is useful when adults prioritize the ideas and issues of youth; many of which can be identified, or named, through dialogue.

**Methods**

The method used is a qualitative case study. I sought to answer my research question: *how do women who were youth organizers with Sisters in Action relate to the broader significance and personal impact of the community organizing work they engaged in as youth?* To do this, I conducted in-depth interviews, and analyzed media documents written about Sisters in Action during their operational years. My methodology is feminist, and is grounded in Black feminism. Many working definitions of Black feminism are in circulation, however, a personal favorite comes from the book, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith* (2014). The book’s editors, Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks, with Barbara Smith, observe that Black feminism as

[t]he pursuit of a vision of global human transformation – while simultaneously naming the distinct experiences of Black women – is at the heart of Black feminism...[and it] is a political movement formed to assert and obtain dignity, autonomy, and self determination. (p. 41)

Black feminism centers the experiences of Black women while working toward liberation and self-determination for all people.
To ethically contribute to the Black feminist legacy with this project, I acknowledge my biases during the process of data collection. I also exercise ongoing self-analysis and self-criticism of how I understand, experience, interpret, and relate to the research process and its participants; view the research participants as whole people; and apply an intersectional analysis to the data collected from interviews and media documents.

**Feminist Methodology**

For this project my method is a case study; my methodology involves the biases and assumptions I bring to this work. It is my own personal belief – as a researcher, a scholar, and a Black feminist – that there is no such thing as an objective observer; how we understand all of what we take in is colored by our previous experiences. Knowing this, I have no doubts that my biases have shown up throughout the research process. During these times I made an effort to engage in a self-reflective process as a way to move through the work and still bring my whole self. This work is feminist as it seeks to address issues of sexism and oppression more broadly. It is feminist in both content and self-reflexivity.

**Case Study**

This research project has been designed as a case study. Within the case study are in-depth, loosely structured one-on-one interviews that I conducted. It also includes an analysis of media documents written about Sisters in Action for Power. The documents were obtained from Amara Pérez's archives. This research relies on women’s personal experiences, often referred to as personal narrative, to exemplify how these women were affected by organizing work they participated in as youth.

**Findings**

The organization’s strategic use of youth-adult partnerships and popular education helped determine what kinds of campaigns Sisters in Action would develop. The group as a whole decided on campaign topics and related decisions, and issues were picked based community response and need, what was happening in the girls’ lives, neighborhoods, and at school. Feminists believe it is imperative for the people most affected by an issue to also be the ones who lead solutions for positive change. Sisters in Action provide an example of how this can be done in practice.

Leadership development at Sisters in Action involved a "creative program designed to train and support girls in envisioning, planning, and carrying out strategic actions to make social change” (Pérez, 2007, p. 94). Y-APs at Sisters in Action were strongly youth-led; it was more than just youth working toward the adults’ objectives. One goal the adult staff had was to work themselves out of a job. Together they co-created all of the organization’s internal and external programming, trainings, and meeting facilitation. These included peer evaluations completed by leaders to determine if a girl was ready to move up to the next level in the organization; in addition to self-assessments. By employing a multi-tiered leadership program that allowed the girls to have an entry point as general participants, the end result was that some of them would ascend to a staff apprentice position, similar to an intern, and later become an official staff member. Adult staff members were responsible for the groundwork of the non-profit, “e.g. grant writing and strategic planning” (Pérez, 2007, p. 91).

**Interviews**
I specifically chose to do in-depth one-on-one interviews with the women because I wanted a first hand account of how they experienced their work at Sisters in Action. Completing the interviews proved to be one of the more difficult aspects of this project because for some of the women, it has been ten or more years since they have even thought about Sisters in Action, and many of them have moved away from Portland. Consequently, locating the women and committing to a day and time to complete the interviews was a challenge throughout. I was, however, able to accomplish three interviews.

The women I interviewed are Amara Pérez, former Director of Sisters in Action for Power; Keri Wilborn, a self-defense trainer during the safety campaign; and Chirece Jones, who persisted through the entire leadership program to become an official staff member at 18 years of age. Having worked with Amara previously, I was able to bring my project concept to her for discussion. She was willing to be interviewed as part of the process, and Amara connected me to some of the women she was still in contact with to solicit them for interviews.

Part of the work that the adult staff members did with the girls was to lead them through a 3-month political education course. Much of this work was grounded in Paolo Freire’s theory and practice of popular education, a process of teaching and learning that privileges the inherent knowledge of the people working collaboratively toward shared goals. In this case, it meant the staff at Sisters in Action found inherent value in the knowledge and experiences the girls brought with them to the program. This allowed the adult staff to assist the girls in connecting their issues to larger systems of power, dominance, and oppression, as well as arm them with the knowledge of the root causes of their problems. Thusly the girls were able to make informed decisions to take action and make change (Ginwright, 2010, p. 85; Pérez, 2007, p. 96).

**Amara Pérez on Popular Education**

*We used a popular education framework to educate the girls on systems of power and to analyze colonialism. With that they were able to see how their issues and problems are connected to larger systems and institutions.*

One of the ways the adult staff connected historic incidents to present-day experiences of the girls’ community was by using Christopher Columbus as an entry point to discuss colonialism. Many of the youth members were very young students and were learning about Columbus in middle school. Figure 4 is an article published in *The Portland Alliance* detailing a community education event to dispel myths about the “discovery” of America.

**Sisters Challenge Columbus Day**

*Figure 4: November 2002 article from *The Portland Alliance*, “Youth call for end to colonialism’s heritage.”*

To challenge myths surrounding the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas and to expose what was at the time called the “Revitalization Project” of north and northeast Portland, Sisters in Action used a community education event.
The event included theatre, dance, rap, and other artistic performances to promote their community’s understanding to the larger issue of colonialism, which they believed was the root of all oppression. The “Revitalization Project” is something we now refer to as blatant gentrification, and has completely changed the face of these historically Black and working-class neighborhoods. Figure 5 highlights the community education and engagement event Sisters in Action hosted and is an example of the girls developing Ginwright’s “critical social capital” (p. 404). The girls planned and executed a community event that told the story of Columbus and colonialism through artistic expression. It opened a door for them to connect with adults in the community they might not otherwise be exposed to. Furthermore, they gained this social ground by using their own skills and interests, without appearing or acting solely self-interested.

Many of the girls lived in a multicultural public housing neighborhood called Columbia Villa. Amara spoke to me about a campaign the girls led to rehome their families and community when their neighborhood was being sold and torn down to build condos at large profit to a very select few politicians. Leaning on their political education of learning about the bloody history of Columbus and his ilk, and an application of popular education, the girls at Sisters in Action were able to formulate a campaign that highlighted the ongoing displacement of Black and Brown people in the U.S. by responding to the issue locally, in their neighborhood.

One of the girls’ demands was that a percentage of the people removed from the Villa be offered permanent low-income housing in the new establishment.

Chirece on Feeling Empowered

The political education the girls received as part of the program’s training taught them to analyze systems of power; grounded in popular education, the girls were given an opportunity to create their own definition of empowerment. A recurring theme in my interviews with Keri and Cherice was how both women defined empowerment, or feeling empowered. Cherice talked about empowerment as something that was preexisting, it was already within her, but working at Sisters in Action taught Chirece how to access her own power.

It’s about self-determination, and tapping into that power that’s already inside of you. That’s what we did at Sisters in Action.

Keri Puts a name to an Experience

Keri Wilborn, who now works in social services in Portland, was highly involved in the safety campaign, which focused on gender-based violence. She talked to me quite a bit about the daily sexual harassment she experienced as a teenager in high school, and how it was through her involvement with Sisters in Action that she was able to put a name to her experiences.
As a kid I knew what I was going through was messed up, but I didn’t know how to talk about it. Sisters taught me how to talk about it...and it felt good to be around other women who knew what I was going through.

Figure 5: Keri is pictured (left, head resting on hand)

Figure 5 Keri is pictured attending a meeting facilitated by Sisters in Action to discuss gender-based violence in the form of sexual harassment and assault. After discussing with the girls their experiences at school and elsewhere, many of them disclosed exposure to some form of sexual harassment. In response to this, a self-defense program was created. Keri was one of the instructors who taught self-defense to middle school girls.

Analysis

In Teaching to Transgress (1994), bell hooks discusses the liberatory properties of education, something that is exemplified in my data. Amara talked about the need to connect the girls’ issues to larger systems of power and oppression, and Keri talked about how much stronger she felt after being able to have language for what she experienced as a young Black and multi-ethnic girl. The ability to adopt politicized language to discuss a personal experience was part of Keri’s education process and what facilitated creating her definition of empowerment. One of the ways the girls’ experiences were named through dialogue (McNae, 2014) was when Keri learned how to talk about her experiences of daily sexual harassment in high school. Political education training and the framework of popular education helped Keri develop language not only about systemic oppression, but also about what was going on with her body and how other people were responding to it.

In my conversation with Chirece she attributed her current work as a birth-worker to having been a youth organizer with Sisters in Action. Though Chirece was a youth leader and eventually an adult staff member, she said observed of herself that

*The work never really stopped.*

The data reflects what McNae maintains as requisite for Y-APs to function successfully, that there must be a genuine stake in leadership development; democratic spaces have to exist in practice; and we have to go beyond essentialism and tokenization to provide continuous dialogue between youth and adults. It is clear that at Sisters in Action the adults were able to create McNae’s ideal environment in their work with youth.

Participating in programming at Sisters in Action gave girls the opportunity to develop pride in their racial and ethnic backgrounds and to acquire knowledge on the historic displacement of people of color as a present-day neo-colonial tactic. Using performance art as a means to connect the
community to the information, the girls “transgressed the theoretical boundaries of conventional forms of civic life (Ginwright, 2010, p. 78).

Conclusion

From Sisters in Action for Power we learn three compelling things about youth-adult partnerships: (1) the fusion of popular education and Y-APs are effective in facilitating girl-led social change direct actions, (2) Y-APs are effective when adults in the partnership approach the work with an intersectional feminist analysis, and (3) community organizing work done in the name of justice and equity requires some amount of risk.

Through an in-depth, one-on-one interview process I was able to glean that Sisters in Action combined popular education and youth-adult partnerships to produce effective results. As previously stated, youth need to be able to connect their problems to larger systemic issues if they have a hope of being efficacious in the fight for equity and justice (Ginwright, 2010, p. 85; Pérez, 2007, p. 96). Sisters in Action for Power was able to actualize multiple successful campaigns by forming a “systemic analysis of colonialism” (Pérez, 2007, p. 95); investing in genuine inter-generational relationships; creating democratic spaces for the girls to be themselves, build trust with each other and the staff; and placing value on the input of the girls and women of color. Part of their success is because the adult staff was willing to be as radical as the girls in order to plan and execute direct actions.

These women and girls were mobilizing their communities for equity and justice by combining popular education and youth-adult partnerships; because of this the adult staff equipped the girls with the necessary tools to speak truth to power. Not only were their campaigns for justice effectual, but they were also events of teaching and learning for all who participated. Amara Pérez encompasses the journey of Sisters in Action quite well with this statement, “the work is not just about what we do, but how we do it; the process is just as important as the journey,” (Pérez, 2007, p. 97).

Limitations of the Study

One of the more difficult aspects of this work has been accessing the organization’s historical documents. Much can be gleaned from an analysis of the training and organizing materials used by Sisters in Action. Unfortunately, I was not able to have prolonged access to these documents. Another challenge was the number of interviews I was able to complete. Due to the fact that many of the women who were youth organizers at Sisters in Action are dispersed across the U.S., I was not able to contact as many potential interviewees as I would have preferred. However, the information I do have serves us insofar as we are able to look back and review the accomplishments of Sisters in Action, and use their combination of popular education and youth-adult partnerships as a model for current and future youth-led community organizing efforts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Amara Pérez has shared with me on multiple occasions the importance and significance of Sisters in Action’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) campaign. To my knowledge, Sisters in Action was the only non-profit grassroots organization to plan and execute a political community organizing campaign against this national policy. Questions to consider: What were the strategies used by staff and members of Sisters in Action to work against NCLB? How did NCLB affect Portland area youth?
Currently, the city budget is being reworked and the youth bus pass come under scrutiny. It is possible that it will be stricken from the budget. It would be interesting to do a comparative study on youth organizing by Sisters in Action, to the youth of today who are demanding that the youth bus pass remain available to Portland Public School students.

Over the last 10-15 years, Portland, Oregon has experienced rapid gentrification. More often than not, gentrification is associated with economic gain and classism. However, the city of Portland has also experienced race- and class-based gentrification in historically Black neighborhoods of the north/northeast quadrants of the city. As fate would have it, this was the area of town that many of the young girls who participated in Sisters in Action’s programming lived and went to school; it is also where the organization itself was housed. Questions to consider: In what ways did gentrification contribute to the kinds of organizing work done by Sisters in Action for Power? How did the displacement of many Black families affect the organization, its staff, and members?

There is a wide gap in the current literature on how low-income Black queer youth participate in or are affected by Y-APs. This would be a good intellectual niche to begin filling with scholarship. I am also curious about the displacement of Black people through gentrification on Indigenous people’s stolen land. Questions to consider: What implications do gentrification present to Black and Indigenous youth solidarity? In what ways do Black and Indigenous queer youth benefit from Y-APs?

**References**


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Notes

1 This is an approximate because I was unable to get a solid confirmation on a closure date for the organization.
2 Percentage comes from an approximation made by Amara Pérez during our interview. She stated that membership was “70% Black, 30% Latin, and a small percentage Native American and white.” I did not have access to, nor was I made aware of any hard data from Sisters in Action for Power to corroborate this statement.
3 From personal notes taken as a student in the “History of the Black Panther Party” course in Portland State University’s Black Studies department, taught by Walidah Imarisha.
4 PFLAG Portland Black Chapter was the “first chapter in the nation created by and for the African American community” http://pflagpdx.org/wordpress/about-us/our-history/
5 See Moya Bailey’s (2010) essay published online at the Crunk Feminist Collective website; http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/
8 The data collected during this study did not explicitly state feminism as a tenant of their community organizing. However, my critical analysis of their work yields a finding that their processes and goals were feminist in nature and practice as they focused on the leadership development of girls and women of color who were at the center of the issues raised by Sisters in Action.