

THE PRO-CHOICE PUBLIC EDUCATION PROJECT PRESENTS:

# SHE SPEAKS:

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO YOUNG WOMEN  
ON REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS



FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH COMMISSIONED BY  
THE PRO-CHOICE PUBLIC EDUCATION PROJECT

# The Pro-Choice Public Education Project (PEP)

The Pro-Choice Public Education Project (PEP) was founded in 1996 by nine leading U.S. reproductive rights organizations to counter anti-choice messages in the media and promote pro-choice awareness. Since that time, PEP has honed its focus to address the growing generation gap within the reproductive rights movement by researching young women's opinions on reproductive rights and health, and designing and disseminating pro-choice messages and programs targeting women ages 16-25 in communities across the nation. Our mission is to educate young women, and the organizations that serve them, about reproductive freedom and choice, thereby developing a new generation of pro-choice leaders and supporters. Our programs focus on three areas:

(1) **Research** *on the opinions of women ages 16-25, using various methods including polling, focus groups, intercept research, and innovative new methods such as community forums.*

(2) **Communication and Outreach** *whereby we create and disseminate communication tools based upon the research results. PEP crafts advertisements, messages, and tools aimed at educating and involving young women. Through our workshop trainings, and strategic partnerships with other organizations, we share our research findings and offer the ads and other resources to aid the organizing efforts of local pro-choice groups and educate young women across the country.*

(3) **Youth Leadership Development** *through opportunities for young women to play an integral role in PEP's decision-making and programmatic work as part of our national youth advisory board, the Young Women's Leadership Council, consisting of young women from across the country between the ages of 19-29. This way, PEP empowers young people by building their skills and serves as a model to other organizations for involving young people in their programs and governance.*

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# Acknowledgements

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Thank you to our consultants Jewel Love and Pamela Weddington who provided project guidance and shared our goal of making this a young-women led research project. Thank you to Eugene Wooden and Digital Underground who videotaped the focus group sessions.

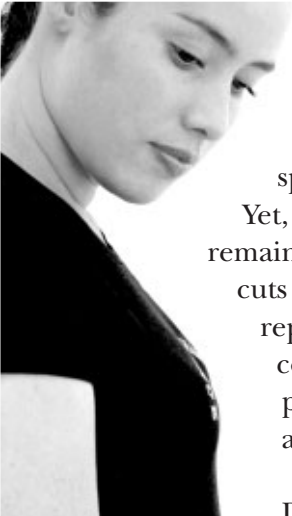
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# Introduction

Over the past several years, we have experienced an assault on reproductive rights like no other. The Bush Administration and the anti-choice majority Congress have loosed a focused and consistent strategy that strikes from all sides. From the outright reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule, to clever, back-door legislation like the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban, Abortion Non-Discrimination Act, and the Unborn Victims of Violence Act that mask anti-choice positions with progressive values, it is clear that our reproductive rights are unraveling in ways small and large, both boldly and under the radar.



More than a response, these attacks require a complete reframing of the issue of reproductive choice and the development of a new and effective strategy that speaks to all women, creating a movement stronger in numbers, passion, and voice. Yet, in spite of this awareness, the stories and experiences of young women of color remain on the outskirts of the reproductive rights agenda. While the HIV/AIDS epidemic, cuts in Title X and Medicaid, and discriminatory welfare reform policies pose significant reproductive health barriers that disproportionately affect poor women and women of color, the debate continues to exist within the narrow scope of legal abortion rights pushing broader reproductive health and justice issues to the margins of the debate and alienating young women of color.

Different life experiences driven by the dynamics of race and class have created a historic juxtaposition between the meaning of reproductive freedom for white women and women of color. While white women have had to demand freedom from compulsory motherhood, women of color have had to fight for the right to bear children and raise them out of poverty.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there has been an inherent opposition by women of color to the views held by many middle and upper class white women that the campaign for legal abortion is the most important goal in the struggle for women's reproductive autonomy. While women of color have historically challenged this narrow position, it remains today as the cornerstone of the modern reproductive rights movement, overshadowing equally important broader reproductive health and justice issues, thereby crippling efforts to reach communities of color and attract and sustain women of color advocates and activists.

In order to reframe and redefine the issue of reproductive rights to build a movement that is more proactive, savvy and strong, we must genuinely address this history. We must accept the unique perspective of women of color not as a deficit that will dilute the effort to maintain the right to legal abortion, but as a rich view that if incorporated in a non-tokenized way, can unleash new voices, messages, leaders and creative strategies to win the fight for reproductive rights in the 21st century.

Driven by these values and a mission to grow a new generation of diverse young women leaders, the Pro-Choice Public Education Project (PEP) created a research project aimed at filling the void of young women of color voices within the reproductive rights movement. Between January and June of 2004, PEP conducted focus groups across the country with young Latino and African-American women between the ages of 16 and 25.

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<sup>1</sup>Jennifer Nelson. *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*. (New York: NYU Press, 2003) 2.

Dorothy Roberts, "Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty: Building a Social Justice Vision of Reproductive Freedom." Speech delivered on April 18th, 2000 at a Public Forum Presented by The Othmer Institute at Planned Parenthood of New York City; Othmer Institute Report. 2001, 22 September 2004. <<http://www.othmerinstitute.org/reports/report1.html>>.

While many grassroots groups have the skills, expertise, and committed activists required to carry out their work, they often lack culturally appropriate research, messages and organizing tools needed to round out their campaigns and target young women of color who are becoming an increasingly greater percentage of the entire population of young women. In recognition of this, PEP embarked on a qualitative research project with a two-pronged strategy of documenting how reproductive health and rights plays into the daily realities of young women of color, and elevating these experiences to demonstrate a sense of their strength, capacity to act and the centrality of their perspective to achieving a vision of reproductive autonomy for all women.

Recognizing the history of women of color and reproductive rights, we looked to the work of Paulo Freire and the popular education movement to direct our research and ensure a non-tokenized space. Guided by the principle that the experiences of “everyday” people constitute a rich, valid knowledge source that is crucial to the creation of positive social change, we conducted listening sessions designed to give voice to the actual experiences of young women of color so that we may use their knowledge and expertise to develop strategies for change.

Our primary goal in conducting these focus groups was to listen to young women of color. To listen to their thoughts, opinions, feelings, struggles, and experiences as it related to their reproductive rights and health. We wanted to understand what they were feeling, thinking, and talking about when it came to their reproductive health and rights. We wanted to understand who they sought out for information about their bodies and sex and how they spoke about these issues. Most of all, we wanted to understand the unique challenges and experiences that young women of color have and elevate these positions into a forum where their voices would be heard.

We intend to use the findings to develop and generate new culturally appropriate activist tools and messages that speak to the reproductive health needs of women of color and work to attract new and diverse leadership. These tools will be created for the specific purpose of strengthening national and grassroots public education efforts targeting young women of color about reproductive health and rights. Ultimately, we hope this effort, along with additional research, and tool development will increase outreach to young women of color leaders, broaden the overall reproductive rights agenda to include the crucial perspective of women of color, and lead to innovative ideas to build a more proactive, strategic movement.

This research is our first attempt to capture the unique and essential reproductive rights perspectives of Latino and African-American women. Our ultimate goal is to give voice to the reproductive health needs of young women of color in order to honor their experiences as a critical missing link toward a truly powerful reproductive rights movement. We hope that this work will enforce the notion that when we make the needs of women of color a priority, we embody one of the most crucial tenets of the reproductive rights movement—to gain reproductive independence for all women.

# Executive Summary

Everyday, women of color struggle to lead healthy lives. Lack of health insurance, economic disparities and other factors make it more difficult for Latino and African-American women to access critical reproductive health services. Without proper access, not only do women of color suffer physically, but emotionally and spiritually, building stressful and burdened existences. As matriarchs, community leaders, and breadwinners, the health of women of color is extremely important to the long-term success and growth of communities of color and larger society. Statistics show that:

- More than one-third of Latinas are uninsured (37%), over twice the rate of white women (16%).
- African-American women are also more likely to be uninsured (20%) than white women.
- Latinas account for more than 20% of the AIDS cases among women, and the HIV infection rate among Latinas is 7 times higher than for white women.
- There are 23 Black women with AIDS for every one white woman with the disease. AIDS is the number one cause of death of Black women ages 25-34. Black women account for nearly 68% of the new cases of HIV reported for women.
- Among Mexican-American and Puerto Rican women, the cervical cancer incidence rate is two-to-three times higher than for white women.
- Black women experience the highest death rates from breast cancer (despite their lower incidence level compared to white women) and also are among those with the highest death rates from ovarian, cervical and uterine cancers compared to other women.
- Latinas are more than 2-1/2 times as likely as white women to have an abortion.
- Black women have three times the number of abortions than white women.
- The unintended pregnancy rate for Latinas is nearly two times the rate of white women.
- Black women have the highest rates of unintended pregnancy.



These statistics paint a daunting reality of the health of women of color. As the future generation, young women of color represent an important link for change. Our findings reveal the important context of their everyday lives and provide a starting point for meeting young women of color on their terms. Our key findings revealed a number of interesting and important facts:

- *Concerns about healthcare coverage were common. Some women were totally uninsured; others had limited coverage that did not cover birth control or prescriptions.*
- *The types of language used to describe sex and sexual health issues varies depending on the setting and the person who is on the other side of the conversation.*
- *Women report negative experiences with their doctors, health professionals and hospitals.*
- *Family members play an important role in the decision-making process related to sexual and reproductive health issues.*
- *Most women of color did not embrace the traditional terminology associated with “reproductive health and rights.”*
- *Many of the focus group participants described their reproductive health as “important,” with the main focus on the ability and right to have children in the future.*
- *Dialogue about reproductive rights often begins and ends with abortion.*
- *Many young women of color were unsure about emergency contraception—its name, how it works and where to get it.*

This report is a first step toward aligning the reproductive health experiences of young Latino and African-American women with the political potential of the reproductive rights movement. As we learn more about the personal experiences of young women of color, we strengthen our ability to build a more responsive reproductive health environment. The key findings from this research provide a documented base of knowledge that can be used to engage young women of color and create collaborative solutions that will protect their reproductive freedoms and their lives.

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# Methodology

## Recruitment

The JL Group conducted eight focus groups between January and June of 2004 with African-American and Latino women ages 16-25 in New Orleans, Louisiana, Los Angeles, California, West Palm Beach, Florida, and New York, New York. The 16- and 17-year-old groups were conducted in New York City. The average number of women in each of the focus groups was 6 for a total of forty-six (46) participants. Two African-American groups were conducted in New Orleans and two Latina groups were conducted in Florida. PEP chose Los Angeles and New York as its combination markets and conducted one African-American group and one Latina group per city. The women were recruited by community-based organizations and other locally based partners. They include the Institute for Women and Ethnic Studies in New Orleans, Kellie Hawkins, MPH Epidemiology Analyst, Sexually Transmitted Disease Program Los Angeles County Department of Health Services and Planned Parenthood Los Angeles, Planned Parenthood of Palm Beach and Treasure Coast Area in Florida, and The Door youth center in New York City.

## Methods

The focus group questions were designed by PEP staff and edited by research consultant Jewel Love of the JL Group. The focus groups were conducted in the evenings or on weekends in order to accommodate the collective schedules and lifestyles of each constituency. Participants received a stipend for their time and were provided lunch or dinner depending on the time of the focus group. Prior to starting each focus group, each participant was asked to complete a demographic profile form. This document collected information on age, race, college enrollment/type of college attended and monthly household income. Each participant also signed an informed consent contract detailing their rights as a participant, PEP's role, and use and dissemination of the information collected. Young women 18 and under were required to present a signed parental consent form at the start of each session.



Jewel Love of the JL Group and at least one member of PEP's Young Women's Leadership Council (YWLC) moderated each focus group. PEP envisioned a collaborative research gathering and analysis process for members of its Young Women's Leadership Council along with selected staff members. To meet this goal and implement PEP's vision of creating a young-women-led research project, the JL Group developed and conducted a moderator's training to provide YWLC members and staff with information on various components involved in focus group research; core elements of moderating; personal characteristics of successful moderators; the role and responsibilities of the moderator; and tips and strategies for addressing problems that may arise.

## **Data Analysis**

As part of its collaboration with PEP, the JL Group executed a second training session to equip the YWLC for the process of analyzing data from the focus groups. This two-hour training, conducted by Pamela Weddington of the JL Group, provided an overview about what researchers look for in the analysis process; identification of primary themes; and suggestions for how to work together as a team to develop and present the findings and recommendations.

Each focus group was videotaped. The tapes were reviewed by the JL Group, PEP staff, and the YWLC with the goal of identifying key issues and understandings of the various meanings implied in participant responses. As a result of the analysis, numerous insights were identified, which are outlined in this report.

## **Limitations**

This research was designed as a first step toward understanding the reproductive health and rights perspectives of young African-American and Latino women. Due to the small study sample, we recommend not generalizing these findings to encompass the views and opinions of all young African-American and Latino women or other demographic sub-populations among young women of color.

## **Focus Group Characteristics**

Throughout this study, we met a great number of women from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and incomes encompassing a wide range of beliefs, attitudes and opinions. Some of the women were young mothers, others were in vocational school, community college, or universities, and some were full-time employees.