

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

eliminating racism  
empowering women  
**ywca**

# ON A MISSION

## A PERSIMMON PAPER

on the YWCA USA  
Generational Imperative

2017

# PURPOSE

The Persimmon Paper on the YWCA USA Generational Imperative is a resource for local associations to both celebrate our history of intergenerational work and to identify a path forward to effectively support the intergenerational mission of YWCA. Specifically, this paper highlights the YWCA USA commitment to young women; the contributions made by these women in the YWCA movement; the reasons why young women are still essential to our work; the strengths, challenges, needs, and opportunities present; and recommendations to support our generational imperative.



# INTRODUCTION

At the core of YWCA’s mission is our commitment to imagine, fight for, and co-create a more socially just world for the next generation of women and to prepare them for that future. The generational imperative informs YWCA’s programs, services, and advocacy because we recognize that the needs of young women and girls are different than the needs of older generations of women. Today, young women aged 18-30 bring unique perspectives, experiences, and expectations to the workforce, family life, and political culture and we must use strategies to empower younger generations of women that meet their unique needs.



# OUR COMMITMENT TO YOUNG WOMEN

A generational imperative has guided YWCA since our earliest days. Our mission and vision for social transformation has allowed younger and older women to come together to share ideas, deliberate, and compromise.

YWCA’s commitment to the lifelong development of leadership skills for women goes back to the 1800s, during which YWCA programs provided a unique and much-needed space for young women to gather and learn skills. The opportunities for young women to become leaders through YWCA range from program participation to leadership opportunities within the organization, including serving as board members, elected officers, and staff. YWCA has also provided young women with entrepreneurial education and fundraising experience.

# CONTRIBUTIONS OF YOUNG WOMEN TO THE YWCA MOVEMENT

Young women historically advocated for broadening YWCA’s constituency. In the 1920s, women of the YWCA Student and Industrial Worker’s movements campaigned against the requirement that YWCA voting members had to be members of the evangelical Protestant church. This set the stage for further expansion of YWCA’s membership and constituency in the years that followed.

As early as the 1910s, young women pushed YWCA to advocate for better working conditions, worker unions, and an end to child labor. By engaging the issues and concerns of industrial women, many of whom were young women, YWCA demonstrated a flexibility and openness that led to some of our earliest public advocacy positions and set the stage for much of our contemporary advocacy agenda.

Women ages 18-30 have always been passionate advocates for racial justice in the YWCA movement. During World War I, YWCA created a program to offer services for Black women in the workplace and, after the war, this program was used to highlight Black women’s labor contributions and patriotism and to create a safe space for interracial dialog based on a shared identity as working women. Black women, industrial workers, and students were the most vocal in getting the national YWCA board to question segregation in the late 1930s and early 1940s, culminating in the creation of YWCA’s Interracial Charter in 1946. And, at the 1970 National Convention, a group of Black YWCA members inspired other women of color and young women from the student movement to support the adoption of the One Imperative, which obliged YWCA “to thrust our collective power toward the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary.”

# YOUNG WOMEN (STILL) MATTER

The work of YWCA is most clearly understood through the lens of our generational imperative. As such, we must be vigilant in consideration of how we might structure our work across age groups to reap the benefits of multiple generational perspectives and to challenge each other in a way that brings forth a shared vision for a transformed world.

Women ages 18-30 fall into one of two generations: Millennials (born 1980-1995) and Generation Z (born 1995-2005). While most research focuses on millennials, intersectional identity is very important for understanding the experiences of both millennials and Generation Z. Our awareness of intersectional identities has been critical to YWCA programming since the beginning of the 20th century. Our work acknowledges that young women, poor women, and women of color are likely to be economically and socially vulnerable due to the foundational structures of race, class, gender and age inequality in our nation.

We also know that young women social justice activists and scholars are innovating, and that we need to bring these new voices into our movement for social justice and empower them to shape our future.

# STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

This Persimmon Paper argues that there are *three strengths* in our work with young women.

1

First, our theory of change rests on the foundational beliefs that democratic practices are essential and that women need to work across lines of difference for the betterment of all women. Our theory of change pushes the YWCA movement to address social problems on multiple levels and guides us to provide services, education, and do advocacy and public policy work. Finally, it requires that we focus on race and racism, because all women cannot be empowered as long as racism exists.

2

Second, the “Association Idea” allows YWCA USA and local YWCA associations to be creative in identifying ways to engage young women ages 18-30. A particular strength of local association autonomy is that their programming can play to the strengths of their members and can respond to the specific needs of local constituents.

3

Third, by reaffirming our commitment to our generational imperative, we also reaffirm our connection to World YWCA and its broad goals of reaching out to and empowering young women across the globe to make meaningful social change. Our movement has a global reach and impact thanks to World YWCA.



A young women from YWCA National Capital Area at the 2017 Women’s March

This Persimmon Paper argues that there are *three challenges* in our work with young women.

1

First, we need to recognize that different generations of women may have different approaches to fighting for women’s equality; expectations about workplace leadership; and strategies when engaging in social justice activism and advocacy.

2

Second, we need to create family-friendly policies throughout YWCA’s. This broad goal is challenging because local YWCA associations, by design, have flexibility in their decision-making. YWCA USA can partner with YWCA local associations to move in the direction of these policies to ensure that our advocacy is consistent with our own organizational structure.

3

Third, we need to differentiate and acknowledge the contributions of young women to YWCA. Highlighting our long-standing focus on intersectionality and our generational imperative can show that YWCA is uniquely well-suited to meet the social-justice interests of the current generations of young women.

# NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

YWCA has *four needs* in order to most effectively engage young women ages 18-30:

- 1 YWCA needs to explicitly identify and reaffirm our commitment to young women ages 18-30 as a critical component of our mission.
- 2 YWCA needs to create and develop sustained leadership opportunities for young women to prevent constituent loss after age 18.
- 3 YWCA needs to provide opportunities for professional and economic advancement that are not exclusively based on volunteering.
- 4 YWCA needs to identify effective models for work with young women in external organizations and build meaningful partnerships and collaborations with those external organizations.

An explicit reaffirmation of our commitment to young women is a powerful reminder that young women can (and should) have an active role in shaping our vision for social justice. We must also take better advantage of the fact that YWCA offers programming across the lifespan, which places us in the unique position of engaging young girls starting early in their lives. Identifying creative ways for women aged 18-30 to work with YWCA beyond volunteering is essential because a volunteer-only model makes YWCA less accessible for women from socioeconomically challenged backgrounds. And, we must identify partners who are effectively engaging intergenerational social justice work and collaborate with them to enhance our own efforts.

YWCA can take advantage of *two opportunities* to build on our historical commitment to young women:

- 1 Use YWCA's national network to create a path for organizational leadership and leadership training for young women ages 18-30.
- 2 Emphasize the ways in which YWCA is uniquely positioned to be a leader in addressing intersectional social justice concerns in the 21st century.

Through our national network, we can show young women that a YWCA career can offer opportunity for advancement, national networking, and a variety of leadership opportunities. With our historical focus on intersectional identity, we can be attractive to young women seeking to engage in intersectional social justice advocacy.



Participants at the 2016 LCBI Young Women's Leadership Pre-Institute

# RECOMMENDATIONS

This Persimmon Paper makes *five recommendations* about how we can continue to effectively support our generational imperative moving forward.

- 1. The contributions of young women aged 18-30 to the YWCA movement need to be more visible. Heightened visibility should include enhanced networking opportunities, local and national awards to highlight the contributions of young women, the development of project grants for young women, and the participation of young women in soliciting feedback from YWCA constituents.
- 2. Leadership and professional development opportunities for young women ages 18-30 need to be enhanced. We must focus on the specific needs of women in college and in early stages of their careers, in order to highlight YWCA's particular strength in a crowded nonprofit landscape. Leadership opportunities must also specifically target the unique needs of young women of color.
- 3. YWCA needs to continue our historical work and advocacy for young women. YWCA should become a leader in offering workers living wages, flexible work schedules, and family-friendly policies and then should highlight that leadership in our advocacy, issue education, and outreach. YWCA should also create materials to facilitate intergenerational conversations; onboard new staff and volunteers; and provide more information about our history.
- 4. YWCA needs to actively recruit young women ages 18-30. Given our historical commitment to young women who are socially and politically marginalized, we need to identify the groups of young women who need us most and commit to ways to work with and for them. We must also develop programs that focus on recruiting young women of color into the nonprofit sector, by taking advantage of partnerships with other social justice organizations.
- 5. YWCA needs to use practices that meet the needs of young women age 18-30. YWCA must collect data to monitor and assess the needs of the young women who receive our services, work for or are targets of our issue education and advocacy, and serve as board members, staff members, volunteers, and donors. We should also use broad strategies to best recruit and retain young women in our movement.

# CONCLUSION

Our generational imperative requires us to prepare young women today to take advantage of opportunities we cannot yet imagine. At the core of YWCA is the requirement that generations of women will build relationships and community and work side by side for a more just future. Young women, ages 18-30, are the past, present, and future of the YWCA movement. YWCA doesn't reach out to young women solely because they need us; we reach out to them because we need them.

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