LISTENING
TO YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR, YOUTH, & ADVOCATES

Listening Sessions for Philanthropy & Policy Leaders — Volume II
COMMUNITIES: AFRICAN AMERICAN + LATINA + HMONG & KAREN
"Today is about learning, taking action together, and leading with hope. This is an opportunity to learn from the young women as they share their stories, solutions, and wisdom."

LEE ROPER-BATKER
PRESIDENT AND CEO, WOMEN’S FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA

Listening Session on the Needs of Young Women of Color
Communities: African American + Latina + Hmong & Karen
VOLUME II | JUNE 2016

HOSTED BY
Women’s Foundation of Minnesota
LEE ROPER-BATKER President and CEO
SAANII HERNANDEZ Vice President
LEE-HOON BENSON Senior Program Officer
ANDREA SATTER Program Officer

A special thank you to the NoVo Foundation for its partnership in convening the Listening Sessions.

Women’s Foundation of Minnesota Grantee-Partners:
CASA DE ESPERANZA
COMUNIDADES LATINAS UNIDAS EN SERVICIO (CLUES)
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WOMEN’S INITIATIVE FOR SELF EMPOWERMENT (WISE)
YOUTHCARE
Creating Pathways to Prosperity for Young Women in Minnesota

The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota thanks the NoVo Foundation for its partnership to convene Listening Sessions in June 2016 with young women (ages 12-24) from Minnesota’s African American, Latina, and Hmong and Karen communities. This report, Volume II, documents the vital community wisdom and solutions at each session, as presented in the narratives of the young women and advocates from each community. The report’s conclusion features overall key insights and recommendations from the young women and advocates, in partnership with the philanthropy, nonprofit, business, and government leaders at each session.

The Women’s Foundation kicked off the Listening Sessions series in November 2015 at the invitation of the White House Council on Women and Girls, as part of its National Listening Tour on Women and Girls of Color. The one-day event featured Listening Sessions with young women and advocates from Minnesota’s Somali and East African communities and American Indian communities. The sessions are captured in the first report in the series, Volume I.

Through the Listening Sessions, the Foundation has been honored to provide a platform for young women who experience the greatest disparities in outcomes in Minnesota to share their experiences, barriers to success, and solutions. Each is a leader, moving us as a community and state closer to gender and racial equity.

Our gratitude to the following community youth and advocate-leaders for their partnership to craft the Listening Sessions’ program agendas and develop and participate in the panels.

**YOUTH PANELISTS:**
- JAYNEISHIA BUCKNER
- LESLIE DIAZ
- SOULITA HER
- YER HER
- KAREN
- LUZ LÓPEZ
- WENDOLINE LORENZO PEÑALOZA
- ARTESHA “PUMA” SABALLOS
- ASANTE SAMUELS
- JASMINE SETTLES
- MARAY SINGLETON
- AH MU TAW
- WENDY
- ALEXINA WOODSON
- MARAY SINGLETON
- NISA YANG

**ADVOCATE PANELISTS:**
- NORMA GARCÉS El Colegio
- CHEE HER HAP
- AMBER JONES Neighborhoods Organizing for Change
- NEDA KELLOGG Project DIVA
- GISELLE LORA Centro Tyrone Guzman
- DR. Verna Cornelia Price Girls in Action
- GAO THOR Hnub Tshiab – Hmong Women Achieving Together
- KAZOUA YANG Empowering Hmong Women, Inc.

**MODERATORS:**
- TAWANNA BLACK Northside Funders Group
- MAYTONG CHANG HAP
- BETTY EMARITA Development and Training, Inc.
- NALLELY CASTRO MONTOYA Casa de Esperanza

**SPOKEN WORD ARTISTS:**
- ESHAY BRANTLEY, MARIA ISA, KA VANG

**NOTE:** The opinions and conclusions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or positions of any person or organization that participated in a Listening Session.
At the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, we believe the challenges and solutions to gender and racial inequity reside at the intersections of race, gender, place, and equity. Our mission as a statewide community foundation is to drive gender equity and build a world of equal opportunity where all women and girls can create and lead safe, prosperous lives. To get there, we know that hearing directly from young women of color and other young women and youth is essential to creating real, lasting solutions.


In late summer/fall 2016, we will hold Listening Sessions with young women and youth who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) and gender nonconforming, and young women from greater Minnesota.

The information gathered from the sessions will help the Foundation develop a statewide agenda for gender and racial equity and increase resources for young women of color and other young women facing the greatest disparities in outcomes across Minnesota.

“We want to hear directly from young women to learn about their success and challenges. Today, we lead with hope and a belief that change can happen.”

SAANII HERNANDEZ
VICE PRESIDENT, WOMEN’S FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA
The Listening Imperative

In Minnesota, research data illustrate the sharp disparities in outcomes for women of color:

- The number of **Minnesota families with children below the poverty line** rose from 64,181 in 2000 to 102,719 in 2014 – a **60% increase**¹.

- **Minnesota families headed by women of color are disproportionately impacted by poverty**. 49.7% of Native American, 49.6% of African American, 41.7% of Latina, and 22% of Asian female-headed households fall below the federal poverty line, compared to 21% of White female-headed households².

- While **students of color and American Indian students now represent 28% of the school-age population** in Minnesota, only 4% of the teacher workforce represents this population³.


The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota conducts ongoing research on the status of women and girls in the state to illuminate disparities in outcomes and create solutions through grantmaking and public policy work. In 2016, the Foundation made grants of $2.6 million to innovative, community-driven programs across the state to create equal opportunity and build pathways to prosperity for women and girls.

Our leadership to drive gender equity through application of an Intersectional Lens Framework™ — Gender, Race, Place, Equity (class, age, ability, LGBTQ, immigration status) — is a unique niche we hold among philanthropies. This intersectional approach enables us to ask a comprehensive set of questions to identify the core problems and target resources to invest in the most innovative solutions to drive gender equity. The Foundation applies this intersectional analysis to everything it does in order to identify the complex web of root causes of inequity and build pathways to prosperity for the state’s women and girls.

Ultimately, our charge is to focus attention, target resources, produce research, and advocate public policy to address the root causes of inequity for women and girls in Minnesota with the greatest disparity in outcomes in order to drive gender equity.
Women of Color
Voice Realities

We know that one size does not fit all any more than one community solution works for every community.

By Foundation design, the Listening Sessions enabled each community to form its own panels to allow for deeper conversation around economics, racism and culture, school and education, societal and gender norms, safety, and health. The young women first shared their stories, experiences, and thoughts through panel discussion. Then, advocates extended those conversations in a second panel, adding research, data, and historical trends to further illuminate and support the young women’s narratives.

As the young women (ages 12-24) and advocates spoke, snapshots of their daily challenges and triumphs emerged through their narratives:

• **Young African American** women are determined to shape their lives and futures to suit their own dreams, despite racism and negative social narratives. They foster change with their actions every day, and call for increased support and visibility of Black women in leadership roles.

• **Young Latinas** are striving for college and professional careers while managing jobs to support their families and the barriers of mixed immigration status (U.S. citizens, documented, undocumented) of families. They are proud of their strong family bonds, but are also frustrated by the difficulty of balancing two cultural identities.

• For **young Hmong and Karen women**, poverty, and cultural and gender norms form obstacles to self-development. Yet, they hold tightly to their dreams and aim for higher education and careers that will enable them to serve those in need and support their families.

The following pages comprise commentary from each of the panels.
LISTENING TO
African American
YOUNG WOMEN & ADVOCATES

“"I’m an organizer, but when people ask me what I see for the future, I want a family and a garden and a quiet successful life — that would be amazing success to me.”

ADVOCATE

“My family went through a lot of financial changes — stable, no food, back to stable — this allows me to be a dreamer. I’m going to work hard and my dreams will come true — that experience gave me that.”

YOUTH PANELIST
Young African American women say financial education is a critical missing resource for their financial stability, and observe that this knowledge is not shared between generations. Other panelists pointed to a system of historical and economic racism that has made financial well-being extremely difficult to achieve. As a result, each generation is preoccupied with daily survival and cannot look to future generational needs.

One panelist stated, "I want to pass on stability and put myself in a position to organize my priorities, even though I wasn’t taught to do that by my parents." Another panelist said, "Success will be when my student loans are paid off. To be able to pay my bills, have six months of savings, not living paycheck to paycheck."

CULTURE & SELF IDENTITY

These young women see clear, daily evidence of racism in their schools and their lives, and they are equally clear that they do not accept the negative stereotypes as they shape their own identities and their futures. One panelist explained, “Worldwide, people think that Black people are bad. There are negative stereotypes out there.”

The young women emphasized that structural racism and white supremacy are not recognized and feel these are issues unacknowledged by white society. “For Black women, the narratives are so built on the ‘struggle.’ If we [society] can’t acknowledge that white supremacy is a ‘thing,’ how can they [whites] acknowledge our work and our struggle?”

Participants also say the fight for social justice and equality is primarily the concern of students of color, and white students seem to be disinterested or do not take it seriously.

“Black people get thought of as ‘one person,’ but we don’t all agree on how to move forward. There are different types of Black people.”

Panelist

Gender inequity surfaces in economics. The young panelists describe high expectations for girls to earn income at an earlier age than boys. They also describe the Black family dynamic as pushing women to take on all of the responsibility of family, making it difficult to realize their own ambitions. When asked whether girls are held to a different standard than boys, more answers concerned racism than sexism. As one young panelist concluded, “White kids are held to different standards.”
All in all, these young women reject the negative social narratives (see section below) and are forming their own identities with internal strength and their dreams for the future.

SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Much of the discussion about safety and well-being centered on the Black Lives Matter-led protests outside the Minneapolis Police Department’s Fourth Precinct (north Minneapolis) after the police shooting of Jamar Clark, an unarmed Black man. The panelists identified concerns about physical harm by police.

“[Safety and well-being mean] taking care of myself, staying true to my beliefs, holding myself in my heart in the highest power, believing in me. I create the world around me through words and actions, and access to healthy foods.”

YOUTH PANELIST

One young woman described safety and security as “...feel[ing] safe when encountering police. To not have to worry about myself or my friends being pulled over and being hurt. To actually feel that the police are protecting us.” Another stated, “Harassment is a real thing. The protests have been peaceful, but when white supremacists attack us, nothing happens.” One young panelist commented, “I want to speak my mind without being made out to be ‘loud, angry, sassy,’ and to be passionate and go for what we want, but without stereotypes.”

The young panelists identified healthy food, inner strength and confidence, and access to supportive resources without judgment as critical to their health and well-being. As one young woman explained, “The way it [resources] is being offered makes a difference.”

NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

The young women do not see possibilities for their own futures portrayed in current social narratives in media, pop culture, and within their own community. They commented on the pressure for Black women and girls to prioritize the needs of men and families first. With the prevalence of negative stereotypes about African American women and girls in the media, they feel they have few positive role models.

“I see a few ‘positive’ African American women who are leading in success in role and gender, but my younger sister still expects that Black girls always perform poorer.”

YOUTH PANELIST
Youth panel participants observe that racism creates lowered expectations at school for African American students, as well as isolation. As one panelist explained, “There are only three Black kids in my class. There is so much focus on me, because the teachers assume I need extra help and then don’t assign me more challenging classes, based on these assumptions.”

Racism at school makes these young women feel anxious, intimidated, and frustrated. It is a barrier to essential relationships with their teachers. One panelist noted that, “Teachers need better training. They need to be more open-minded to different learning styles and building connections between students and teachers. Make it more two-sided.”

“I am a critical thinker, but I get push back from teachers. I’ve been doing work [related to the protests at the] 4th precinct and my teacher is a white teacher...the conversation was really difficult.”

“Youth Panelist

In addition, the young women identify a clear absence/discounting of Black history in their education. As one panelist commented, “During Black History Month (February), everyone had to do a project. But there was not one mention of Black History Month; it was all focused on Valentine’s Day history.” Another panelist agreed, “We still study primarily European history, with very little Black history focus.”

Panelists advocated for schools to equalize their expectations for students, both academically and behaviorally.

“[At college.] I was always intimidated. The teachers said I was too intelligent to be in the classes I was in, but the more difficult classes were always filled with white kids. I was worried I would look like the ‘dumb Black student’ — there was a lot of pressure to live up to extra standards. I deal with anxiety about not knowing if I want to go beyond. I feel the standards I set for myself are higher.”

“Youth Panelist

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Panelists of all ages are frustrated by the lack of change, especially when the issues have been identified and discussed for so many years. They emphasize that the focus now must be on concrete action for enduring change. As one advocate noted, “We have fallen in love with the problem more than we have fallen in love with the solution.”

They identified several specific starting points for long-term solutions:

1. **Support young Black women in attending and finishing college.** One advocate said “all hands on deck” are needed to get the current generation of young women to college, into careers that support their well-being and financial security, and able to pass on their knowledge and their wealth. She commented, “We need to get serious about getting these girls out of high school successfully without babies. We need to get them to college. We need to help them with applications, in order to get them across the line.”

2. **Focused support of and for Black women leaders is essential.** One advocate noted, “Support and trust Black women in our communities on different levels and scales because we are overly criticized and under supported...Black women are now being more visible and we need to support that.” Another advocate expanded on that theme, saying, “[White women], you can go to spaces and places and step up for our Black girls in some places that we cannot go. We need you to not go alone, you need to pull us up in those spaces with you and to make it happen.”

3. **The ability to pass down wealth and knowledge about financial management is critical.** To make this possible, systems must change now. Jobs in child care and elder care must pay family-supporting wages; job scheduling must accommodate families so they don’t need to choose between working and caring for their children.

4. **Participants on both panels agreed that change starts with every individual.** Young women described leadership in terms of service, humility, inclusion, empathy, shared responsibility, and the need for confidence in themselves and others who lead. As one panelist said, “Black leadership should believe in Black leadership. We doubt ourselves and we doubt in the movement. Check the politics and ego and the stereotype that you have to burn yourself out and do too much – and share the responsibility.”

“I cannot let another girl go into society thinking she isn’t good enough or powerful enough do whatever she wants in this land.”

**ADVOCATE**

“To be able to do it in bold and courageous ways, we need to change the gate keepers into allies.”

**ADVOCATE**
5. **Advocates focused on the growing momentum to act now.** One advocate commented, “Movement is happening, the girls spoke on it. We are training up the new leaders. Time for everyone to ask yourself, ‘Do you really want change and if so, how will you do it, individually and across races?’ Really truly ask yourself how and what will you do and who will you do it with.”

6. **Advocates emphasized that for solutions to be effective, there is a need for a “people-centered movement” rather than direction and initiative for change coming from external agents.** They note that the resources are out there, but they need to be available without strings. One advocate stated, “[We] need strategic partnerships that are legacy-building for two to three years of sustainability, and to not have to jump through hoops to get the resources to be able to sustain so we can be successful.”

The topic of trust was closely tied to this point. Advocates commented that funders’ requirements are too restrictive in many ways, and the result is reduced impact. More trust with accountability by both sides would enable much more to be accomplished.

“**We are not interested in you ‘helping out’ our kids. We want to do whatever we have to do to get them across the line and move the needle by doing more and doing differently. You can’t demand what you don’t know how to do.”**

**ADVOCATE**

“**How can we have champions on the outside that will trust those on the inside? Trust that the relationships will be mutually beneficial.”**

**ADVOCATE**
LISTENING TO Latina YOUNG WOMEN & ADVOCATES

ECONOMICS, HOPES, & DREAMS

The Latina (ages 12-24) panelists are clear in their goals for college and professional careers, but the economic path is tough, and made even more so when they and/or family members have an undocumented immigration status. While they draw strength and support from their strong, unified families, that support comes with obligations.

“I am passionate about my community and being part of it; I want to be the change I wish to see in my community.”

PANELIST

One panelist noted, “It is important for my mom to be able to go to work to help pay for my college and bills. So I babysit [for my two sisters]. I miss out on a lot of school clubs because of babysitting…I don’t mind helping, because my parents are a support for me.”

Another panelist said, “We depend so much on our families, so that even though we have the opportunity to help ourselves, we still need to support our families. I got a full scholarship to...
college…[that] allows me to live on campus...But it’s not enough...Because my mom isn’t documented, I have to help with money. I still have to work.”

One advocate commented that the primary reason girls don’t go to college is that they are working to support their family.

CULTURE & SELF IDENTITY

The Latinas spoke of managing the expectations of two cultures at once. One panelist said, “I have two different cultures. It is hard to adapt. I was very young when I came here. Trying to keep my Hispanic culture without knowing it was hard. My dad said it was important for me to continue to speak Spanish, which made it hard for me to be a good writer, and be successful in school. But now I love knowing both languages.”

Though young panelists identified the traditional family unit as a favorite part of their identities, the strong family cultural influence can be difficult. They feel caught when their parents’ expectations do not align with American norms. As one young panelist explained, “You are doing double work, trying to fit into both cultures.” Another said, “It’s hard when...your parents don’t understand how things work differently here.”

“\”The Latino community is really united. My parents have done a good job helping me to feel united with my family and community, despite being far away from close family.\”

YOUTH PANELIST

“\”Despite the struggles we face, we have our heads up, and keep going forward.\”

YOUTH PANELIST

They want to know more about their family’s culture, but do not see it recognized or valued by others. The young women don’t see themselves represented and feel they are not heard. One panelist said, “By being in the U.S., my culture isn’t recognized. Textbooks and stuff — I didn’t read about my culture [in them]. I don’t know much about my own culture because of this.” Another commented, “It’s hard to find someone with an unbiased opinion to tell me about my culture.”

Others experience overt racism, as one panelist described: “Recently in school, there is a kid who refuses to work with me...When someone tells you that they don’t want to work with you because of your skin color, it’s hard. I was born here. I was raised in the same country as you, I sing your song, I speak your language. When you tell me to go back, it’s hard to hear. When students tell you they don’t want you in their country, that hurts.”
SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Advocates say the feelings of invisibility and of being unwanted weigh heavily, noting that a primary cause of death in Latinas is suicide. Latina panelists have little to no support in managing two cultural identities, the stigma of immigration, and the invisibility. Advocates emphasize it is important they have a forum to discuss the unique challenges of their lives. They also point out that if trauma has been experienced, as it has in many immigrants’ lives, then it must be taken seriously, and caring and healing must be funded.

NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

Though young panelists are aware of the gender equity gap, they seem more concerned about negative social narratives related to immigration and the lack of positive role models.

One Latina stated, “It’s hard being in a field and doing something that is usually seen for men or other races. It’s hard trying to accomplish a goal if you don’t see someone like you represented...One time, I saw a Latina woman in a commercial about computer science and I was so proud. I wanted to be like her...If we see one person doing the same thing as us, that helps.”

Another young panelist said, “I come from an immigrant family...Being in a different country and not having documents to fulfill the different jobs is what keeps us from fulfilling our gifts and being able to share that with the world. When I see people doing something, I think, ‘Wow, I wish I could do that,’ but because of the different barriers we face, we aren’t able to fulfill our talents and share with others. We could be benefiting from each other so much, but we have these...barriers.”
The lack of immigration reform, combined with the deficiencies of the education system, create barriers to higher education for Latinas. Undocumented status is a rigid and frustrating obstacle to getting financial aid. One panelist accentuated the gravity of this issue by saying, “I am a U.S. citizen, but as you go through these scholarships, because they ask for a parent’s SSN, or some number, that means your entire career. There are five million families in the same situation, because scholarships are asking for info that we don’t have.”

As the first in their families to attend college, the Latinas spoke of a need for financial support and a support network.

According to one advocate, “College dropout for Latinos is high because we don’t have the economics, and we don’t feel we belong. We need to build communities that help keep us there, because it’s so hard to even get there.” Another said, “If you are Latino and get to that point [first-generation college student], then it is still incredibly difficult. Once you get a scholarship, the college says ‘go’. My family can’t help me fill out tax forms, to study. There needs to be prep from a young age so that when we get to college, we aren’t playing catch up or feeling inadequate or alone.”

Panelists and advocates both identify a critical lack of diverse and competent teachers in the state. One advocate spoke passionately about the need for more Latino teachers and more teachers prepared to teach people of color: “We need a change in teaching. [Current] teaching preparation does not prepare them to work with youth of color.” Another advocate outlined the scope of this issue in the state: “We need a program to get more Latinos into teaching. We need an institution that focuses on initiatives just for people of color. The state’s 600 teacher licensure programs could only come up with 1.4 percent people of color? We need to ask ourselves why and decide what we’re going to do about it.”
Advocates and panelists agree that change is accelerating for Latinas, making immediate support and funding all the more critical.

One advocate stated, “Students took time away from tests to talk about how to make the Latino population more visible in college and things easier for those coming behind us. It just needs to be supported more. Everything is starting this movement for the Latino community.” Another noted, “People want to see this movement...little by little, we are moving, but we are swimming upstream. I should be the last generation working so much in isolation. Enough is enough.”

Advocates and panelists suggest at least five key paths that will lead to long-term solutions:

1. **Latinas must be at the table along with funders to prioritize issues.** As one advocate noted, “We are open to ideas, to money. But I think the perception is that the conversation is very Black and White in Minnesota. American Indians and the Hmong community also get left out. It’s not that it’s them or us, it’s all of us. But we are only put at a table where it’s them or you. And we are left fighting for crumbs.”

2. **Advocates say solutions must come from within the community to maximize funding impact, along with more collaboration between nonprofits.** One advocate stressed, “I see all the hoops to jump through to get funding to help youth. The criteria that has to be met isn’t always relevant for what we want to do or what kids need. There’s a mismatch between what they want and need, and what is available. It’s not fair to youth. They should be given a voice, like what we’ve done here today.”

3. **Take a multigenerational approach rather than funding in isolation.** Advocates say funding and support must align with the family-oriented Latino culture. With the emphasis on the importance of families in achieving success, funding should open employment pathways for women that allow them to support their daughters in pursuing their dreams. One advocate said, “We are often very individualistic about approach. These women and advocates, they live in community and the larger community, so we can’t fund in that isolation. We have to respond in this community approach.”

“I have lots of dreams still. I want to go to Harvard, but this is a long shot with my family’s immigration status. I want to be a lawyer or supreme court justice and help people with immigration.”

**YOUTH PANELIST**
4. **Evolving immigration policies to create pathways to citizenship is critical.**
   Undocumented status is both a direct barrier and an indirect cause of many of the challenges identified by Latinas and advocates. Immigration reform must happen for Latinas to thrive. With the generational impact of undocumented status, pathways to citizenship should be created to be accessible to all family members.

5. **The crisis in Latinas’ low graduation rates must be acknowledged and addressed.**
   Latinas want to step forward into education, careers, and stability, but too many barriers prevent it. To support this generation in building safe and prosperous lives, funders must approach the economic, governmental, and social barriers to graduation with holistic support.
LISTENING TO 
Hmong and Karen 
YOUNG WOMEN & ADVOCATES

ECONOMICS, HOPES, & DREAMS

Extreme poverty shapes the lives and goals of many of the young Hmong and Karen women panelists. With early exposure to lack of control in life and dependence on others for help, several young panelists’ dreams for their future include financial control, as well as careers serving others in need. Many envision careers in healthcare.

One advocate noted, “A lot of [Hmong and Karen] families rely on assistance, but many times the parents don’t understand the paperwork and processes, so the young kids have to manage the process.” Another stated, “The needs are so different in our community. The experiences these girls have are so unique from what others in poverty might have.”
Family responsibilities can be a significant barrier to pursuit of their dreams. These young women have significant family responsibilities that require their time before and after school, and often prevent them from taking part in activities that could help them develop social networks. As one panelist explained, “It’s hard to balance school/work/social life with so many responsibilities; it can be a struggle. Some parents just want to see your report card with good grades, but don’t allow extra activities.”

Another panelist commented, “I am a full-time student but I do not feel like it, because I am at home all the time and I don’t live on campus. Living at home takes away what it would be like to really be a student.”

Cultural norms and strict gender expectations are also barriers to their hopes and dreams, as outlined in the next section.

**CULTURE & SELF IDENTITY**

Young Hmong and Karen women balance two cultural identities that often are in conflict. The young panelists are caught between the risk of disapproval and shame by acting outside of Hmong cultural and gender norms and the dreams they have for their own futures, which align more closely with American culture.

As one panelist explained, “[My parents] want me to get married and have a family and I don’t want to do that right away. I can’t talk to them about it, it will just be an argument. Other parents in America see their daughters have opportunity, but in our culture and new immigrant families, they don’t expect women to accomplish much besides raising a family...If you do something wrong, you destroy your family’s reputation.”

Another panelist commented, “I plan to volunteer for the Peace Corps after college. The challenge is my parents, they are everything to me, but...I need to fight with them because they assume I cannot do what men can do. They believe I’m putting myself in a dangerous position so I need to convince them that I am able to do what I want as a woman.”

An advocate added, “They are trying to balance two identities at the same time, being Hmong and being American. They feel they have to sacrifice one and cannot be both.”

“My mom doesn’t think I should go out at night, I miss all opportunities to experience what it feels like to be a young adult because of all my family obligations.”

**YOUTH PANELIST**

“It is different for Hmong women born here in America versus those who are immigrants. They don’t have the language barrier and the lack of confidence that immigrants do. There is so much judgment for Hmong women and the image they have to uphold.”

**YOUTH PANELIST**
NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

[Note: This question took the form of inquiry about racism and culture.]

The young panelists spoke about experiences with racism to varying degrees. Three of the five have experienced racism personally, in their neighborhoods, at school, or at work.

One young panelist shared, “When we moved into another house, it was in a white neighborhood and it was very uncomfortable. A white lady yelled at us ‘Get out. You don’t belong here, we don’t want you here.’...When she found out we were Christians and that my brother was in the army, then she changed her mind and started being nice to us. When it looked like we were more Americanized, she became our friend.”

Another panelist stated, “Where I work, there is a new manager. She asked someone with less experience than me what all our duties were. She prefers to ask other employees and have those employees tell me what I am supposed to do, but I have more experience.”

SAFETY & WELL-BEING

[Note: Safety and well-being were not addressed as a direct question in this Listening Session due to time constraints. The following answers were provided in the context of other questions.]

Health insurance, and continuity of shelter and support for their families were key concerns for the young Hmong and Karen women. One panelist said, “I am the only one in my family that has any insurance. I am the ‘safest,’ but then if something happens to someone in my family and we don’t have health care, we cannot afford to get them care.” Several panelists shared their desire to buy their families a home.

“[Domestic violence, sexual assault, and sexual exploitation] are topics hardly ever discussed in Hmong culture — it is hard to talk about with family. To have places that don’t ‘name’ these — they are very personal and people are afraid to participate. But, it is moving and we are connecting with the young community.”

ADVOCATE

Another young panelist commented, “We are on food stamps and something happened. My mom had to call Ramsey County about why they stopped our food stamps. They told us that we had to do tax forms in order to receive the assistance. Our social worker should have informed us why we were not going to get help any more. My mom wouldn’t be able to fill out the form and we need help getting through that paperwork.”
Advocates focused on young Hmong and Karen women’s well-being from other angles. As one advocate pointed out, “We do a lot of different things around economic prosperity. We could have some improvement on youth development, and emotional and psychological development. We focus on academic and career success, but not emotional.” Another said, “Mental health and gambling are huge challenges, but we need to have professionals understand and recognize this.”

**EDUCATION**

Young Hmong and Karen women need support as first-generation college students. However, most of the discussion with advocates focused on the need for support in melding their cultural identities in ways that are positive, healthy, and confidence-building.

As one advocate shared, “We lack a fully funded women’s organization that can teach young women who they are and where they come from and teach parents how to raise their daughters and help them with cultural competencies. We know the problems; we just need the resources. The conference once a year focuses on all the resources we have that can help, but we need to have the younger generation understand what is available to better their lives.”

Another advocate stated, “Girls here now experience different challenges, so they need mentors — successful young women who have made it and they can see they can make it happen.”
SOLUTIONS

The need for greater understanding of Hmong and Karen culture by funders and the larger community is clear. It is an essential step to creating more opportunities for young Hmong and Karen women. Advocates outlined several additional, vital needs that must be addressed in order for change to occur:

1. **Need to mitigate the undervaluing of Hmong women stemming from traditional cultural norms and expectations.** Related to this, the need for mentors, confidence-building, and changes in parenting, as outlined in Education (page 20). At the same time, the need to preserve aspects of the Hmong and Karen cultures. One advocate described the need for “…spaces that people can go when they can step away from binary Hmong/American Man/Woman. We need spaces for them to show up as they are and also spaces that accommodate different religions.”

2. **Need to make the process of accessing resources easier, including help with completing forms and paperwork.** With the language barrier that affects some families, young Hmong and Karen women have taken on parental responsibilities for completing the paperwork and have no resources to turn to themselves.

3. **Need to create more advocates and allies.** As one advocate emphasized, “It’s just as important that the wider women’s community care about our issues, not necessarily to lead us, but to support us in making this [movement] bold and successful.” Another said, “We want you to visit us, reach out to us, and find out how we can organize together so we can make positive change.”

4. **Need for more resources.** As one advocate explained, “We need finances and resources to do the work. We do almost all of it through volunteers. We need to be able to hire people and devote more time.”
Conclusion

Young women of color need targeted positive investments in solutions defined by their communities. They also need the partnership of leaders in philanthropy, nonprofits, business, and government, at the local, state, and national levels.

KEY INSIGHTS:

• **The education system is failing girls and young women of color.** Though education is the pathway to achievement of dreams, Minnesota’s education system presents barriers for young women of color. The influences of racism and undocumented status prevent critical student-teacher relationships. There are few teachers of color, and even fewer who are prepared to teach in culturally competent ways. The girls and young women are ready to learn; we must offer education that aligns with their needs.

• **Education and economics are intertwined issues.** Many young women of color are limited or prevented in pursuing their education by family obligations. Some young women are charged with overwhelming household responsibilities while their parents work; others are a critical source of income for families struggling to survive. In either case, the lack of economic stability is holding these young women back. It erodes their self-confidence and initiative, and alters their hopes for the future. In addition, barriers to the health and safety of young women are rooted in these same issues.

• **Young women and girls hold contradictions.** As reported with the Listening Sessions in November 2015, these young women carry multiple, often conflicting identities every day as they work to balance the expectations of two cultures. This work saps energy and self-esteem, and requires a constant balancing of priorities in their lives. Many young women believe that to succeed, they risk the well-being of their families and loss of emotional support from their families.

• **Racism is still a critical issue.** Young women of color continue to grapple with racism. It affects each community of color in different ways, including lowered expectations at school, diminished opportunity and unequal treatment at work, and confrontation by people in their neighborhoods. Young women of color say acknowledgement of its existence by teachers, students, and the wider community would be a significant step forward.
RECOMMENDATIONS:

These recommendations for increasing resources and creating systems change come from within communities of color:

1. **Fund programs and strategies that support economic opportunities and financial stability.** Increase resources that represent pathways out of poverty and enable young women of color to gain traction financially.

2. **Build and strengthen deeper relationships with communities and with grantees that support young women of color.** By making deeper relationships a goal, all stakeholders will be more likely to leverage unique strengths and achieve synergies that can lead to greater impact.

3. **Strive to more authentically listen, engage, and adapt.** Cultural understanding must be viewed as a cornerstone of successful partnership in supporting change for young women of color.

4. **Though there are many common challenges, solutions must be specific to each community.** Solutions, and access to services, must be culture-specific or they will not be successful.

“I hear different cultural communities describing the same themes. The elephant is being described, one talks about the tail, the other the head. There are overarching issues, but there is a landscape to do this work.”

**BETTY EMARITA, LISTENING SESSION MODERATOR**

5. **Diversify Minnesota’s teaching pool.** Increase the percentage of teachers of color in the state so it more closely reflects the percentage of students of color. Advocates also suggest a focus on preparing current and future teachers to better serve students of color.

6. **Address linked issues simultaneously.** Issues with a symbiotic relationship like the education system and economics must be solved in tandem — neither one can be moved forward without the other.

7. **The time to act is now.** Momentum for change is building within these communities of color. Young women see themselves as part of the movement and represent a generation on the brink of a different, better future. Now is the time for community leaders to step forward with partnership, investment, and trust in order to fully engage. This moment in time is unique.