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SYSTEMS OF POWER AND YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR

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DEFINING SYSTEMS OF POWER

Systems of power are the beliefs, practices, and cultural norms on which individual lives and institutions are built. They are rooted in social constructions of race and gender and are embedded in history (colonization, slavery, migration, immigration, and genocide) as well as present-day policies and practice. These systems of power reinforce white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity as defining power structures in the United States. Systems of power are oppressive and define relationships between marginalized communities and the dominant culture; they also shape social norms and experiences within marginalized communities. Systems of power feed the structural barriers that are the root causes of inequity experienced by young women of color.

In 2017, CLASP conducted focus groups with young women of color in Birmingham, Alabama, Central Valley, California, Denver, Colorado, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Washington, D.C. Our conversations with young women of color identified a set of seven structural barriers that are root causes of the economic marginalization they experienced. This brief draws from the perspectives of Hmong-American, African American, Latina, Native, LGBTQ+, and gender non-conforming young people on their experiences of systems of power. Building from lived experiences captured in the quotes that begin each section, the brief provides an overview that establishes how race, gender, and their intersection impact the structural barriers detailed in the accompanying fact sheets. Only by understanding and naming the roots and the ground that produce outcomes for young women of color can we begin to dismantle these barriers and challenges and avoid replicating inequity.

YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR
AT THE INTERSECTIONS

"They don't care about, like, intersectionality feminism. They don't care about that stuff. What they care about is getting the next paycheck. Um, put food on the table. That's what they care about... You're like, you know, Black lives matter. We need to be woke. We need, we need to worry about this stuff. Why should I do that? How does that affect me?"
- St. Paul

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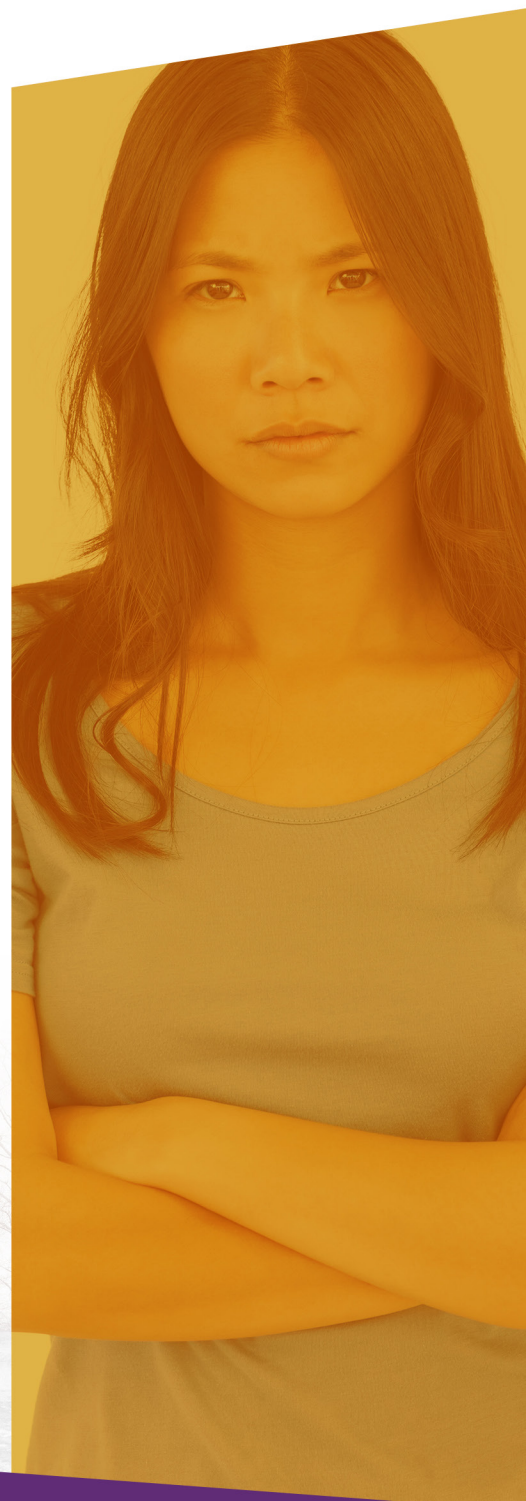
Intersectionality is the understanding that identity is complex and multidimensional, with different aspects of identity more salient depending on context.[1] Young women of color are uniquely situated at the intersection of systems of power rooted in race and rooted in gender. What this intersection looks like and the outcome disparities that we observe are shaped by the specific history, culture, and geography of different groups of young women. As a result, different groups of young women highlighted different structural barriers, and each group that we spoke to is not represented on every fact sheet. What is universally shared is the way in which young women's experiences are circumscribed and defined by systems of power as well as recognition of the need to tackle these issues head on.

ROOTED IN RACE

RACISM

"Like, I was never taught how to... like work with people who don't want to work with me. I... I was never taught how to talk with, like, white people. I was never taught to, you know, like how to like fight racism." - St.Paul

Racism is defined as a complex system of beliefs and behaviors, grounded in a presumed superiority of the white race. These beliefs and behaviors are conscious and unconscious; personal and institutional; and result in the oppression of people of color and benefit the dominant group.[2] *Simply put, racial prejudice + power = racism.* Racism operates along four dimensions (implicit-explicit, individual-institutional) in the lives of young women of color. At the institutional level, racism is embedded in policies and practices that play out in government, schools, and other powerful institutions that block

people of color from equal opportunities and create advantages for the dominant culture. On the other hand, individual or personal racism happens in one on one interaction.

Racism is so ingrained in the American culture that some people are unaware of when they are being racist. This is known as implicit racism. Implicit racism refers to an individual's utilization of unconscious biases when making judgments about people from different racial and ethnic groups.[3] Implicit racism manifests in a variety of ways, including employment opportunities, discipline practices at schools, and disparities in the criminal justice system.[4] For instance, Black and Latina students comprise 40 percent of the female K-12 public school student population and 51 percent of the student referrals to law enforcement.[5] In contrast, explicit racism is overt and is an outward expression of hatred for other racial groups. Both can show up at the institutional and individual levels. For example, state and local Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation are historical examples of explicit institutional racism, and the Trump Administration's "Muslim Ban" that blocked entry to the US for individuals from certain majority Muslim countries is a contemporary example of explicit institutional racism.

RACE-BASED DISCRIMINATION

"And some white people are really nice, but there is—but there are other white people who are like oh, like, oh yeah, you're a person of color. Like I'm not gonna talk to you. Like, we were working this project together, but like, I'm still not gonna talk to you, and I'm not gonna ask you what your opinion is. You know?" - St.Paul

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SYSTEMS OF POWER AND YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR

Race-based discrimination refers to unequal treatment based on race, present in institutional and individual forms.[6] Young women of color experience race-based discrimination in schools, jobs, and in many other settings, impacting their wages and career paths. Women of color, including young women, are more likely to be paid less than white, non-Hispanic men and are often overrepresented in low wage paying jobs.[7] Even worse: the gender wage gap for women of color is widening.[8] The impacts of race-based discrimination can be detrimental and traumatizing. For women of color, race-based and gender-based discrimination can be dehumanizing and leave them feeling invisible.

COLORISM

"Yeah. Well I say that because I was growing up excluded from groups just because I was dark; even if they were Mexican, because they were light skinned Mexicans, well I'm not Mexican but I'm Salvadorian, but because I was darker than them they didn't want to hang out with me."

- Central Valley

Colorism, also known as discrimination based on color, is a practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin. This form of discrimination often occurs within racial/ethnic groups.[9] Colorism has a long history as a tool of white supremacy used to subjugate Black and Native populations.[10] Whether in the context of enslavement of people of African descent or European colonization, preferential treatment of those with lighter complexions served as a tool to divide people of color and reinforce whiteness as normal and preferable.[11] Today, colorism can impact young women's health, opportunity for success, and ability to get a job across communities of color in the United States.[12] For instance, in movies, media, and entertainment, women of color who are in reoccurring star roles often have lighter skin; these representations impact young women's self-esteem and body image while projecting a monolithic view of "acceptable" women of color.[13] Studies have also shown skin tone influences decisions about employability and societal acceptance.[14] In one study on Mexican Americans, the author notes Mexican Americans with light skin "earn more money, complete more years of education, live in more integrated neighborhoods and have better mental health than do darker skinned ...Mexican Americans."[15]
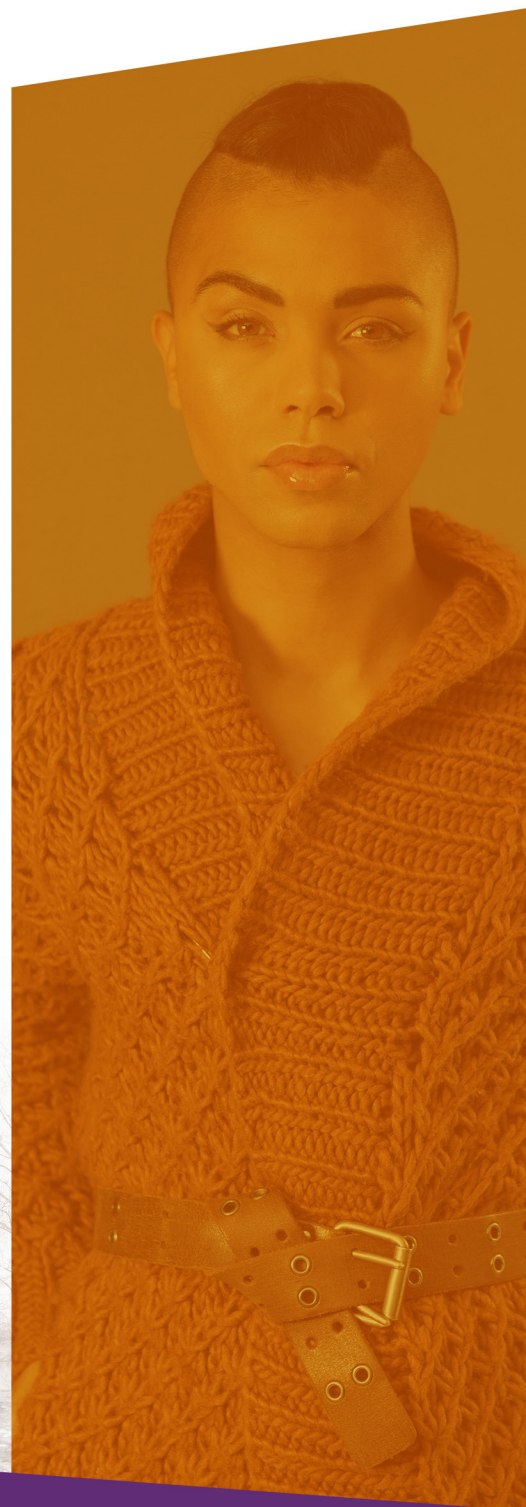
ROOTED IN GENDER

PATRIARCHY

"So that's kind of the hard part and just having to sit through a Hmong wedding and hearing like all the, um, elders tell the, the bride that she's now her man's property, and she can't go out when she wants…She has a husband, and she has to let him know that she's going out, and she can't wear makeup. She can't do that unless she tells her husband. It's just like, you know, we live in America and things change, but you're still holding on to all these things, and you're perpetuating the system." - St. Paul

Patriarchy is defined as a social system where cisgender men (those whose sense of personal identity and gender correspond with their birth sex) can dictate moral authority, profit from social privilege, have control of property, and have power over all other genders.[16] Patriarchal values, such as gender roles[17], are rooted in male dominant societies and perpetuate gender inequality. Patriarchy isolates anyone who does not fit the norm. For example, gender-expansive youth often report being barred from facilities that match their gender identities.[18]

GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

"Yeah. I think some struggles that women in the community face is when you're a single mom or you are trying to be independent it's like they said the guys are usually the ones renting a home… being the renters and if you try to be there they're, like, oh no, you don't have a man that has a stable job. You can't do it by yourself. So they're just like kind of discriminate on gender. A lot of jobs too. My mom struggled a lot trying to get a job. Yeah you can't lift that you're a woman. Or like looks. Why do you look like that? Like you don't dress girly. You're not girly enough for the job. Just discrimination a lot because of gender."
- Central Valley

Gender discrimination is unequal treatment based on gender or sex.[19] This type of discrimination takes on many forms, including unequal pay for women who have the same work/occupation as men, sexual harassment, and workplace discrimination.[20] Gender-based discrimination is a common civil rights violation that far too many women of color experience in the employment and education sectors.[21] For example, women face multiple barriers when pursuing "nontraditional" or male-dominated careers from counseling to course enrollment bias.[22]

GENDER STEREOTYPES

"Yeah, I think here there is really, like, a big focus on like the gender differences and like really hold on to those differences and I feel like it's also apparent like in school too. I was I did pretty well at school but like there would still be attention like oh but this guy did too like oh but like how did you beat him? There was always like kind of questioning like why like the little Mexican girl like with beating out everyone. And I know that that was true for a lot of my friends and a lot of different classes too. Like there was kind of like there's not a tracking system but it's like certain like

expectations I guess like if you show your strength or like more power like assertiveness then people are kind of like what are you doing? Like that's not very like feminine or so like that." - Central Valley

Gender stereotypes are defined as widely accepted judgments or biases about an individual's personal traits, behaviors, occupations or physical appearance based on gender.[23] Unlike facts, stereotypes tend to persist after they've been disproven, and are embedded in the fabric of society.[24] Stereotypes are damaging, especially in the adolescent years when identity formation is essential for youth development.[25] Because stereotypes generalize across individuals, they ignore the diversity, complexity, and intersectionality of women of color. For young women of color, the race/gender implications can be unrelenting. One study found that youth of color face racial stereotyping from adults who work with them. Researchers found that Black teenagers and Native Americans were close to 10 times more likely to be considered lazy than white adults.[26] Another study found that Black girls are seen as older and less innocent than their white counterparts.[27] Individuals in positions of power and leadership (e.g. teachers, police officers, elected officials, and employers) and their perceptions of gender matter and can have long-lasting negative effects on educational attainment, career development, health, and socioeconomic status.[28]

DISCRIMINATION BASED ON GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUALITY ORIENTATION

"I wanted to add on the advice thing that I would give to an organization is again, like, a discrimination like on no discriminating on sexuality because I know my mom gets discriminated a lot because she's lesbian and that's one thing that is so hard for her to get a job because they look at her and they're like oh you're like one of those girls on the north side that dresses like a boy? And you're probably in gangs too and you probably drink and you probably smoke weed and do all of that gang related stuff and she really doesn't. She doesn't leave the house. She's all about her kids but because of how she looks and because of the sexuality she has she gets discriminated on a lot especially when looking for jobs or homes or something." - Central Valley
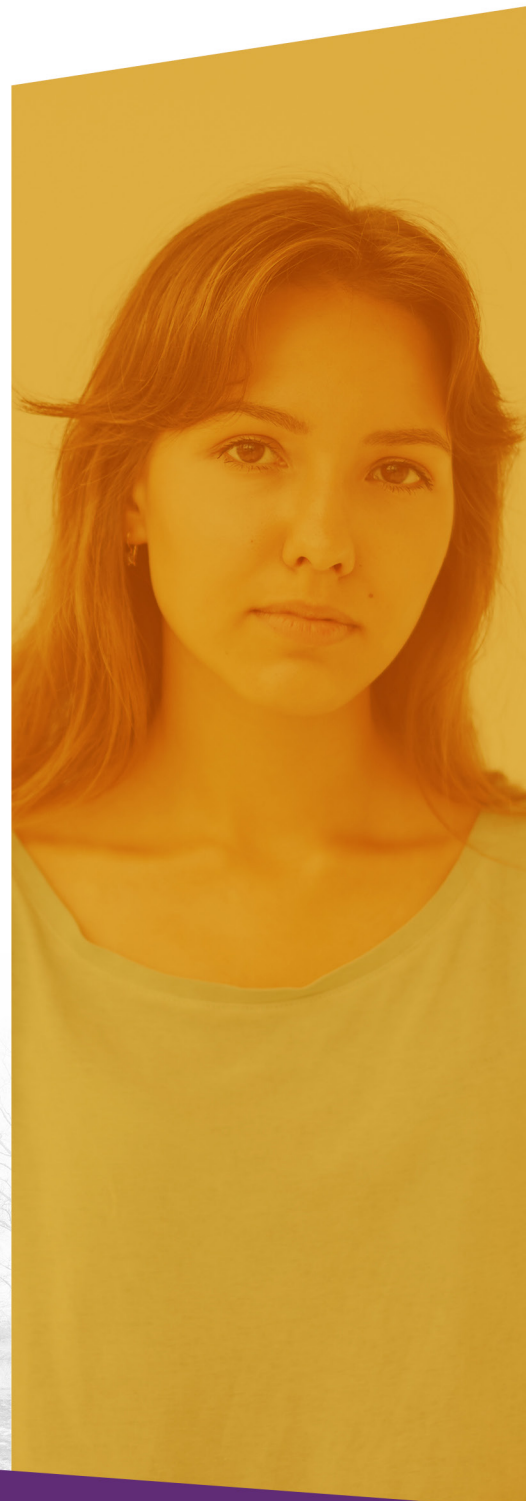
Gender identity is defined as one's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.[29] Sexual orientation is defined as an emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. Dehumanizing societal persecution of gender non-conforming and LGBTQ+ identifying individuals is pervasive in America and is demonstrated through discriminatory laws, institutional practices, and individual behaviors. For example, transgender and gender-expansive youth of color don't feel safe in school and are more likely to have a lower attendance rate due to safety concerns.[30] LGBTQ people of color are more than twice as likely to face discrimination because of their identity when interacting with police than their white counterparts (24 percent vs 11 percent).[31] Similarly, when it comes to seeking employment, about one-third (32 percent) of LGBTQ people of color experience discrimination when applying to jobs, compared to 13 percent of white LGBTQ individuals.[32]

CONCLUSION: SYSTEMS OF POWER AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The first step towards equity for women of color is visibility. Our conversations with young women of color identified a set of seven structural barriers that are root causes of the economic marginalization they experienced: low-wage work, financial strain, educational inequity, mental health, housing instability and homelessness, exposure to violence, and the criminal justice system. These structural barriers are rooted in ground tainted by the race-based and gender-based systems of power highlighted above. The outcomes young women of color experience are not essential characteristics or pathologies; they are the product of the roots and the ground on which young women build their lives. Only by understanding and naming the roots and the ground that produce outcomes for young women of color can we begin to dismantle these barriers and challenges and avoid replicating inequity.

Achieving economic justice for young women of color requires understanding the complex ways that race and gender interact to generate inequality as well as solutions that address these intersections head on. These challenges require large-scale investment and bold policy proposals to achieve meaningful change. Policymakers and advocates who support better outcomes for young women of color must support policies that have the potential to remedy the structural barriers they face in work, education, housing, health, and their communities. At the same time, policymakers and advocates also have a responsibility to see the unique space occupied by young women of color, analyze policy proposals with these populations in mind, and ensure their policymaking deliberately attempts to make visible their needs and challenges. Through these efforts, we can begin to shift the ground for young women of color toward justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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