

# Reflections from a National Listening Tour with Girls of Color and Advocates

Prepared by: Aimee Meredith Cox, PhD

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**Note from the NoVo Foundation:** *As we worked with our partners to plan a series of listening sessions across the country, we were eager to ensure that the insights and perspectives that emerged could be widely shared with others. These perspectives, so often marginalized or ignored in national dialogues, are critical to educating funders, policymakers, practitioners and many others across the country. At the same time, it was clear that in order to establish a space of safety and respect, recording the sessions was not appropriate. So instead, we invited renowned cultural anthropologist Dr. Aimee Cox to listen to the sessions, and to independently share her thoughts. The report that follows is a collection of observations that are hers and hers alone, and not necessarily those of NoVo or any other partners.*

*Of course, no short summary can ever begin to fully capture the perspectives and complexity of girls of color and the communities in which they live, and this summary does not seek to do so. Instead it offers one window into the lives of girls whose perspectives are too often overlooked and ignored. We are eager to share Dr. Cox's reflections so that they can inform the work of others throughout the country.*

**Author's Note:** This narrative summary is from data collected during NoVo's listening sessions on May 23rd to May 25th 2016 in the Mississippi Delta: Belzoni, Greenville, Jackson, and Tougaloo, Mississippi. NoVo Foundation's Adolescent Girls' Right U.S. Strategy Design comes at a pivotal time in the history of the U.S. in terms of the national conversation on race and gender and their intersection in the lives of young people living in under-resourced communities. The previous three years have marked the emergence of the movement for Black Lives in response to, not only individual and highly publicized acts of state violence and murder, but in response to the every day ways in which young people of color, particularly Black youth are systematically devalued and dehumanized in the United States. And, yet, even as a national focus on questions of citizenship and rights expands to include those who have been previously denied both, the impact of structural inequity on the lives of black girls remain under-investigated. The 2016 election of the Trump administration demands for an even greater urgency in addressing the structural violence and normalized interpersonal violence faced by girls of color. NoVo's commitment to girls of color, as evidenced through this project, is a critical intervention in this present movement moment. In these narrative summaries, I apply my training as a cultural anthropologist specializing in youth culture, race, gender, and institutional cultures to curate the key themes and central concerns that emerged from the girls and young women's testimonies during our travels in the Southeast as part of NoVo's commitment to listening to their truths. NoVo's listening tour in this region spanned across nine meetings with 80 girls, young women and women representing communities across Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia.

## **What It Means to Be a Girl of Color in the Southeast United States**

What does it mean to be a young woman of color in the Southeast United States? Each young woman who identifies herself as a young woman of color would respond to this multi-layered question with her own equally complex answer. However, our three days of listening to girls and young women and their adult allies in Belzoni, Greenville, Tougaloo, and Jackson, Mississippi reveal that there are clearly central themes and common concerns that thread through the lives of the majority of young women living in this region of the United States who shared their experiences with us.

### **Social Narratives**

A useful way to understand how young women in the Mississippi Delta make sense of the world around them and their place in it is through narratives. Narratives are collective stories that inform how individuals view themselves and comprehend their ability to navigate contexts from family to local community to larger society. Constructed through a combination of their own life experience, dominant or prevailing representations of themselves in mainstream society, wisdom curated from members of their community, and insights from individuals young women identify as sharing similar experiences, social narratives are powerful organizing frameworks. What follows are the predominant narratives that young women of the Mississippi Delta utilize as the discursive tools to conceptualize what it means to be a young woman of color.

The space between how we define ourselves and how we understand ourselves to be defined within larger social scripts is a gap all of us attempt to manage in our daily lives whether we are fully cognizant of this or not. **Young women of color are keenly aware of the distance between who they know themselves to be and how they are captured within mainstream misunderstandings of their identities.** This is significant for several reasons. Identity management requires a great deal of emotional and intellectual energy and also requires that young women come to terms with that fact that how they value themselves is not necessarily how they are valued in society, or even within their own families and communities.

The young women in Mississippi were very specific when naming the stereotypes that comprise the narratives that impact how they are seen and treated. These include, for example: *angry, man hungry, baby mamas, outdated, and uneducated.* **The tropes and stereotypes they identified as the most prevalent misrepresentations of young women of color, and black young women in particular, are adjectives that cover a great deal of ground in that they describe presumed emotional states, attitudinal orientations, relationships, and intellectual capacities.**

In addition, these stereotypes are all part of larger racial narratives that sustain an anti- Black ideology that the young women understand to be the foundation of how they are seen as operating from multiple deficits because they are not only Black but also young, female, from the south, and (in some cases) from rural areas. A historical legacy of slavery and contemporary media images of young Black women are the temporal poles between which these young women located the construction of their misrepresentation. It is, perhaps, this understanding of both history and contemporary intersections of race, gender, and age that compelled the young women of color in Mississippi to understand “of color” to mean “Black” when used to define their experiences and, thus, themselves. The broader narrative that the south is outdated and backwards also plays a role in what it means to be a girl in this region. One young woman shared that she was asked by a college peer: “do you live on farms with animals?” Girls coming from the south are faced with images that mark them as anti-intellection, anti-progressive and “stuck”. This becomes more dangerous for Black girls who are already carrying narratives rooted in anti-black racial and gender biases. To be a Black girl in the south means compounded negative assumptions about value and capacity.

### **Beauty Ideals**

In addition to tropes that negatively define their behaviors, attitudes, and presumed capacities, young women found the realms of beauty and body image to be embodied spaces where they are also defined as not good enough or unable to measure up to idealized representations of femininity. In this case, “light skin,” “curly hair,” a “thin” body type, and a physicality that appears to be “bi-racial” were identified as the aesthetic ideals that exclude them and impact whether or not they are seen as desirable by potential romantic partners or as one young woman said, “looked down on,” by others. Another young woman remarked “people say I’d be prettier if I were lighter,” and yet another young woman explained that beauty being equated to light skin is an historical construction that “started from slavery days. Everyone wanted the light skinned Black woman.” **The size and shape of their bodies is a factor that is also used to determine whether or not a young woman is not only desirable or valuable, but also capable.**

A young woman who defined herself as “plus sized” noted that she frequently receives comments such as, “If you were smaller, you’d be able to do this.”

### **Resiliency**

What underlies these conversations about external measures of personal worth and self- validation is resiliency. Resiliency mitigates the distance between social representations of young Black women that are often negative and how they choose to see and value themselves. Rather than take stereotypes and socially constructed notions of Black girls and women as absolute truth, young Black women in the Southeast United States challenge these

notions with their own analysis of their inherent worth, beauty, and capacities. The young women used terms like “self-acceptance” and “trusting yourself” to talk about the process of transitioning from needing to prove their worthiness to understanding that the only and most important validation they need must come from themselves. As one young woman boldly stated to the group of other young women, “You have to break free from validation. You don’t need people’s permission. You have to know who you are and be okay with who you are.” Young women are also creating spaces and designing programs to provide opportunities for other girls to connect and heal with each other.

Although resilience and internal strength are clearly attributes that afford young Black women the ability to persevere, they are not wholly protective strategies. Resilience and internal strength are not only admirable but essential character traits when you are constantly confronted with social scripts and prevailing narratives that can work to undermine a healthy sense of self. Yet, it would be wrong to assume that the ability to develop counter-narratives and an internal barometer of worth can protect you from the types of cross cutting emotional, physical, and sexual violence that many young Black women experience within various contexts.

### **Naming Violence**

Adult advocates for young women of color living in the Southeast United States explained the ways in which many young women are hesitant to name certain types of violence they experience as violence. This is particularly true when it comes to sexual assault where young women may not name this as such especially when they find themselves violated by perpetrators with whom they have intimate or familiar relationships. This non-naming becomes exacerbated by social charges that cast young Black women as resilient and independent, specifically in relationship to young Black men who are cast as vulnerable and, as several adult advocates stated, “endangered.” In recent years, advocates working to dispel the racist myth that Black men and boys are only perpetrators of violence has helped to shed light on the impact structural racism has on their lives. The murder of Black men and boys by law enforcement and mass incarceration have also demonstrated the literal removal of Black men and boys from their communities. There has not, however, been adequate visible narrative shaping to demonstrate the equally harmful consequences state violence has on the lives of women and girls. Thus, even when the social narratives that frame young Black women’s lives are positively oriented such as being independent or exhibiting strength, for example, they can still inhibit their ability to be accurately seen and appropriately protected. **Narratives of young Black women’s independence support the national narrative around young people of color that largely ignores the experiences and needs of young Black women.**

This “independence sentiment” is then easily internalized by the young women who identify themselves as their only source of support. “Nowhere. It’s dangerous everywhere, even in your own home. You aren’t safe anywhere. You have to watch your back everywhere,” is how one young woman discusses where she feels safe. Another young woman explains, “within myself. I am safe within myself to protect myself,” in response to the question of where she finds safety and protection. In addition, this self-reliance mandate can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression which may go unnoticed or untreated because, as one young woman relayed “people don’t realize that Black girls suffer from depression.” **Given the social script that says young Black women either don’t experience trauma or are less vulnerable than young men, or when they do experience trauma are able to manage it through their own skills of self management and resiliency, it may become especially difficult for young Black women to confront and heal from these deeply wounding experiences, and compel girls to become adult women before they have experienced their childhoods.** One young woman describes this tension of having to appear strong while dealing with or suppressing trauma as “being at war with yourself.”

## **The Contradictions of Community**

The self as the primary site for locating strength, validation, and protection is mitigated by other people and institutions in young women's lives, such as parents, friends, school, community organizations, church, and, even, the work place. In ways that may at first seem contradictory, individuals like caregivers and spaces such as schools are identified as both supportive and harmful. In some cases, schools provide a context that sometimes feels "safer than their community." While in other instances, schools, especially those that are predominantly white, are where young women have to institute their most vigilant self-protective and identity management strategies. Mothers provide comfort and stability, while young women also experience their mothers as judgmental and mercurial, leading one young woman to say about the mother she previously defined as supportive as also acting in ways that make it "feel like she doesn't love me at all." Fathers also maintain a complicated space in young women's lives. There is a sentiment of longing for fathers even when they are living in the home with young women. Although fathers may be physically present in the home, providing material resources and enforcing discipline, their emotional presence is not as keenly felt by young women who define this level of intimacy from their fathers a necessity.

Whether mothers, fathers, or other caregivers are seen as supportive or harmful; loving or dismissive appears to shift over time as the needs and perceptual understandings of the young women change. Institutional contexts such as schools and churches are also neither entirely good or bad, unilaterally empowering or fundamentally disempowering. The place that people and spaces occupy in young women's lives exists on a dynamic continuum. Nonetheless, young women continue to express that what they ultimately find supportive are people and places that offer guidance and challenge rooted in love and care. Young women want to be pushed in ways that allow them to navigate social institutions, difficult relationships, and their own insecurities while being supported in naming and challenging racism and patriarchy. This means that young women often find themselves accepting the conflicting narratives within institutions such as churches where they may, for example, receive spiritual guidance but not be fully accepted as young women who identify as queer, lesbian, or questioning their sexuality and/or gender identity; or where they may want to question mandates that tell them to forgive those who have inflicted pain in their lives without attending to their own health and healing.

In the case of their mothers, young women often feel as if the way their mothers try to protect them is through practices of silencing. Rather than share their own personal journeys, mothers, many of whom were also taught to suppress trauma, may see secrecy as a protective strategy while their daughters may, as a young woman revealed, "blame mothers for a lack of transparency" when the young women feel ill-equipped to contend with their complicated feelings of shame and depression related to unaddressed trauma. Mothers may be blamed in part for a lack of transparency when it comes to articulating their personal histories to their daughters, but mothers are one of the most critical threads in the intricate web of individuals that surround and hold young women in community.

**Understanding the importance of young Black women's interconnectedness with the people and institutions that comprise their community is critical.**

Time and time again, the young women in the Southeast United States identify themselves as deeply connected to their families and communities and in need of support and guidance from them, as they also hold their family members and the individuals in their community accountable for their concerns as young women of color. The needs that young Black women identify in terms of their personal safety and protection as well as the ability to succeed in self-defined ways despite the influence of the social narratives that work to constrict their options, are often obscured by the inability of adults to, as one ally rem, "intentionally keep the conversation focused on girls." And, when the conversation does turn to young women, a focus on self-sufficiency and resilience has the danger of shifting the conversation to how young Black women can "succeed" by doing more, being better, and improving rather than how larger social narratives and institutional structures must transform in order to accommodate a perspective that honors all young women's lived experiences.