

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

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Observation Period: July 10th to July 13th 2016

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## Southwest United States

Albuquerque, Española, and Las Cruces, New Mexico

**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 the NoVo Foundation's listening sessions from July 10 to July 13 2016 in three cities in New Mexico: Albuquerque, Española, and Las Cruces. Albuquerque lies at the center of the state and is the largest and most populous city in the state of New Mexico. Española, known as the first European founded capital in the New World, is approximately eighty-eight miles to the north of Albuquerque with a population in 2016 of just over ten-thousand. Las Cruces is the second largest city in the state with a population of just under 100,000 compared to Albuquerque's population of a little over half a million. Las Cruces is home to New Mexico State University, New Mexico's only Land-Grant University, and several military sites. The federal government and the university employ the largest number of people in the area. Las Cruces is approximately two hundred miles south of Albuquerque and three hundred miles south of Española.

These statistics are useful for a basic geographic mapping of these cities, their relative size, and proximity to one another. However, there are other important links between these cities that impact the ways in which young women of color define themselves and locate their place within their communities. The popular conception of this region of the United States is that it is one rich in cultural heritage. This is capitalized on in the cities' promotional and tourist narratives that mention the authenticity of the region exemplified through its strong historical references and connection to the land. In the listening sessions with young women and their adult advocates in each of these three cities the themes of culture and community, history and heritage emerge in the details young women recount about their day-to-day experiences.

Culture and community are contradictory and complicated spaces for young women as they can be both sources of strength and gender-biased mechanisms that constrains their options. The history of European and U.S colonialism suppressed indigenous culture and cultural practices which manifest in a contemporary culture of silencing and secrecy that directly impacts young women's capacity to speak their truths and voice their concerns. The hesitancy with which young women in this region of the United States, in general, approach talking about themselves and their needs could be easily misread as passivity. A more accurate assessment would be that the young women in this region communicate within a larger community context that is protective of the information held within the community and understands how this information can and has been used against them. The reservations with which young women speak are, thus, embedded in practices of assessing the impact and outcome of speaking.

Immigration, migration, and borders prominently frame the experiences of young women in this part of the United States. This has always been the case for this borderlands region, but takes on additional weight with the change in the Federal Administration following the 2016 elections and the instatement of a United States President who ran on a platform that included building an actual wall between Mexico and the United States and is acting on his expressed commitment to enforce draconian immigration laws. As the United State becomes an increasingly exclusive territory, there are consequences for the most vulnerable region of the country and for the most vulnerable individuals within this region – young women of color. These shifts impact how young women and their families are able to access resources and sites of safety, freedom, and protection in and beyond their communities. A young woman in Albuquerque stated, "My mom migrated for a better life." When the ability to shape a better life for oneself is taken away from women of color, it is imperative to understand how this translates to the lives of girls and young women of color.

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

"Girl of color" is not an easily defined term or readily applied label for young women in the Southwest. The young women who shared their stories and experiences defined themselves in terms that included: Chicana, Indigenous, Native, Asian, Bi-racial, and Multi-racial. Conversations about race in the United States tend to focus on a black/white binary. The young women in this part of the United States demonstrate, not just the ineffectiveness, but also the danger of viewing their lives through this organizing prism. Although these young women do not unilaterally define themselves as Black or White or African American or Caucasian, they do position themselves in relationship to an idealized whiteness where they understand whiteness to be a marker of privilege and power that they do not possess. In many cases, young women evoke pride in their cultural heritage as a challenge to white supremacy. One young woman revealed that because she attends a predominantly white school she has to "remind myself where I come from." She continued by stating that "it is good to know you have deep roots and a rich culture. This is the greatest most valuable thing you have." The need to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity aligns with the sentiments of adult advocates who discuss the "pressure to conform to white ideals" and "forced assimilation" as significant concerns that young women have to face as they are learning to claim and assert their identities.

Among those young women who identify as Chicana, some of these young women identify as white, others identify as non-white but not necessarily "of color," while others feel comfortable with the definition "of color." The term "girl of color" is one that does not, in general, resonate with indigenous young women although they have a strong sense of their distance from whiteness, white society, and white culture.

Several young women mentioned additional complexities involved in claiming a racial identity. One young woman mentioned her Afro Latino heritage and her family's support for the Black Lives Matter movement as something that is important to her but not something you would know necessarily know by looking at her. She noted that, "all movements for liberation are connected." Other young women explained that family members sometimes accuse them of "acting white" or, as one girl stated, "acting like a cultured white person" when they take on behaviors and speech styles from their time in schools and other institutions that may be set apart geographically or culturally from their communities of origin. These young women express a desire to manage all parts of their identities from those aspects developed and nurtured within their family and community as well as those they gain in other arenas as long as they do not threaten their sense of self as a Chicana or Native or Indigenous or Asian young woman. In short, the young women of the southwest navigate the various aspects of culture, tradition, mainstream society, social ideals, and their own beliefs and expectations to outline their own context dependent definitions of "girl of color."

### **Gender Identification**

During one of the listening sessions with adult allies, an advocate claimed that young women in her community "need an intersectional analysis." This woman was speaking to one of the most consistent themes to emerge from the narratives across all sessions—the strong sense of gender identity among young women. But, this gender identity is primarily perceived as an isolated variable rather than in relationship to other factors such as ethnicity, race, and class status, for example. The young women discuss both the ways they value and honor women and girls in their own lives and how they see women and girls devalued within their own homes and communities.

One young woman offers this astute commentary, "I feel like I lack validation of myself and my opinions as a woman." The society that I come from is centered around men. Women keep everything together but aren't seen as valuable."

This is a very telling statement that is echoed in different ways by other young women who discuss the ways that they are dismissed because they are girls. A young woman offered, "my opinions in my family don't matter because of my gender." It is apparent that gender identities emerge from the familial network and are reinforced by the

interactions that take place there that are often reflections of the larger society. It is also important to note that these young women focus not just on the devaluation of women but notions of masculinity that place both men and women in roles that do not always lead to healthy or beneficial identifications. When asked to imagine her ideal future world, a eighteen-year-old young woman said that she wanted to “live in a world where there is healthy masculinity.” This is why adult advocates name the dearth of women role models outside of the domestic space as a problem in young women’s gender identification. As one woman remarked, “You need to see yourself reflected and know you have a place. You can be told that, but you need to see it. Young women need to see women in positions of power in a political and professional sense. We all need to create opportunities for women to come into these positions.”

The ability to understand notions of masculinity as part of the problem with the suppression of girls and women may be due in part to the often implicit mentions of domestic abuse in young women’s narratives. In a rare explicit naming of domestic violence, one young woman stated, “There is a history of family abuse. My father was very abusive, so I learned to honor feminine strength.”

### **Family and Community Centered**

Throughout the conversations in the Southwest, family and community are named by young woman as the realms where they locate their sense of self. It makes sense then that their gender identification and relationship to family and community are deeply intertwined. Family heritage and lineage especially the roles of mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers are important for shaping how young women define and access emotional strength and think about the limits and possibilities of being female. When young women name their sources of support and encouragement, they most frequently name their mothers. They talk about the sacrifices their mothers make to care for their extended families often within challenging financial circumstances. Young women respect the fortitude of the women in their families that they believe has been passed through the generations, while critiquing the way gendered caregiving is relegated primarily to women and, therefore, not respected. The young women level this critique while taking on the role of caregiver within their own families. Many of the teenage young women who participated in the listening sessions mention the people in their families they are responsible for taking care of from siblings and sibling’s children to parents and grandparents.

A young woman expressed that she was “trying to do better for my parents and grandparents.” She continued by stating, “I am trying to do better for myself but I feel isolated.” This statement encompasses a great deal of the conflicting feelings young women in the Southwest have regarding their responsibility to their families and their responsibility to themselves. They are expected to take care of everyone and achieve certain measures of success in their own lives but mostly for the betterment of their families and communities. Young women feel alone and isolated when the supports they are expected to provide are not reciprocated. A seventeen-year-old young woman said, “We are always taught that you can do it yourself and you don’t need anyone else, but you do need the support.”

Community, like family, is both a site of pride and strength and one that can create challenges and limitations. One young woman noted, “we’re all very different people and our culture makes us feel better in different ways.” Culture and community are often used interchangeably as ways to talk about a collective heritage that is steeped in traditions that the young women define broadly as non-Western. As one young woman notes, “I grew up in New Mexico where it is mostly Hispanic. I do not know what it’s like to be elsewhere.” An important part of this identification with community and culture is a respect for elders. But, this respect is not without certain tensions. As one young woman stated, “It is prominent in families and communities of color that respect for your elders is required. I will always respect my elders but they don’t always know best. They have one idea but it might not be what I need.” This statement illuminates intergenerational relationships and the need these young women feel to both respect tradition and find ways for the traditions to be flexible in light of their contemporary needs and concerns.

Although there is apparent pride in community and cultural heritage, young women in New Mexico are also keenly aware of the negative tropes and narratives that frame their community to the world outside. The negative narrative they identify most frequently is that of pervasive drug and alcohol addiction among their family and community members. Although statistics and lived experience evidence the structural realities that contribute to the prevalence of addiction in these Southwest communities, this is by no means the final analysis or whole story young women recount about their experience in their families and communities, even though they are impacted by the consequences of intergenerational addiction. Expressed strong ties to land and the earth, and a holistic environmentalist worldview is one way that young women employ an alternative narrative of their culture and community. A seventeen-year-old young woman reminded the group in her testimony that “we’re all gifts from the earth” and that if you “love yourself, the earth, and what the earth gives to you” this reflects “the way our community was created and how we can maintain it.”

In addition, young women name the solidarity within their communities as the nexus of its power and the reason why, as one young woman stated, “we will always come together and take care of whatever problems we have to fix.” This statement reflects a more general sentiment expressed by many of the young women that the while the problems may be identified as emerging from their communities, the solutions to these problems must emerge from their communities, as well. Thus, progress and positive change are identified as community-based rather than rooted in larger outside structures and systems.

### **Growing Up in Addiction**

Addiction is a subtext to many of the other young women’s narratives around family, community, and care giving. Particularly in the Española region, but in all areas of New Mexico, drug addiction—with causes and consequences directly linked to disappearing economic opportunities, proximity to the border, challenges with citizenship status, difficulties of immigration and migration, and the devaluation of low-income communities of color – transforms familial relationships and the roles and responsibilities of young women. Addiction is also linked to other factors that destabilize young women and put them in danger such as domestic violence, sex trafficking, and inadequate health care. Young women discuss parents, siblings, and grandparents’ struggles with alcohol, crystal methamphetamine, and heroin. Addiction often debilitates the primary wage earner in the family, leaves the most vulnerable members of the family unattended and unprotected, and disrupts the domestic routine. Teenage young women in the Southwest step in to fill these gaps by taking care of family members and maintaining the home, often while still attending school and working part-time jobs. It seems to be a given that it will fall to the adolescent young women in the home to support the needs of the other family members in the face of chronic intergenerational addiction. As one young woman explained, “I take care of my grandparents. They are both in their seventies. I do everything for my grandmother. I even feed by grandfather.”

Other young women talk about helping to raise their drug-addicted siblings’ children and occupying an intermediary role that compels them to manage the generational gap between grandparents and grandchildren. When asked to think about how their needs factor in to the familial equation when they are charged with offering care to others, a young woman revealed that thinking about her needs “feels weird because I don’t do that.” Another young woman elaborated for her and many of the other young women sharing the same experience by stating, “those thoughts are always there but we don’t have time to really think about it.”

Young women are aware that their inability to think about their own needs may potentially impact their ability to implement their visions for the future. One young woman reflecting on the challenges with addiction within her family and her need to take on an adult role while she is still in her teens, emphatically claimed that she “wants to be more of a ‘thrivor’ than a survivor” and that her current familial obstacles should not define her future path.

## Silencing and Secrecy

What is most revealing about narratives and personal testimonies is often what is left unsaid or that which subtly implied as an underlying or shadow narrative. Domestic abuse is mentioned in a matter of fact way, as an aside, or implied as the reason why mothers and other female family members need additional support or are praised for being strong. Sexual abuse arose in the discussions with adult advocates but rarely emerged in the conversations with young women. This is a significant distinction to untangle since several adults discussed the dangers of confidentiality and secrecy in their communities and the need for, as one advocate named, "less closed doors in homes." This same advocate identified confidentiality as a Western concept that contradicts a traditional cultural ethos where the community resolved problems and supported individuals in what she called "an open safe space."

For many adult women of color in the Southwest, colonialism and secrecy are hand in hand. Secrecy was required to protect their culture from eradication through colonialism but is a tactic that also erodes community. Another woman offered, "There is a different path we can take as opposed to the colonial path. We need to disappear fear to get us into our wholeness. A culture of violence uses fear to hold us in our shell." This larger history of silence and secrecy impacts young women's relationships with their family members, peers, romantic partners, and authority figures. It also helps contextualize why a young woman from the Southwest might feel, as one eighteen-year-old young woman stated, that "I have so much to say but don't know how I can say it."

Silencing and secrecy require a different type of listening one that pays attention to comments such as this one by a seventeen-year-old young woman who believes, "You shouldn't fall in love with your plans. Plans are just things that adults make up to make you feel you are in control." What fears and social realities collude to make this young woman so attuned to the ways her plans may not be realized and are largely out of her control? And what would a response look like that took these fears and realities seriously while creating a reality in which young women of color in the Southwest can live free of violence, access the resources they require to thrive, and make plans based on dreams they have fallen in love with?