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Fall 2007



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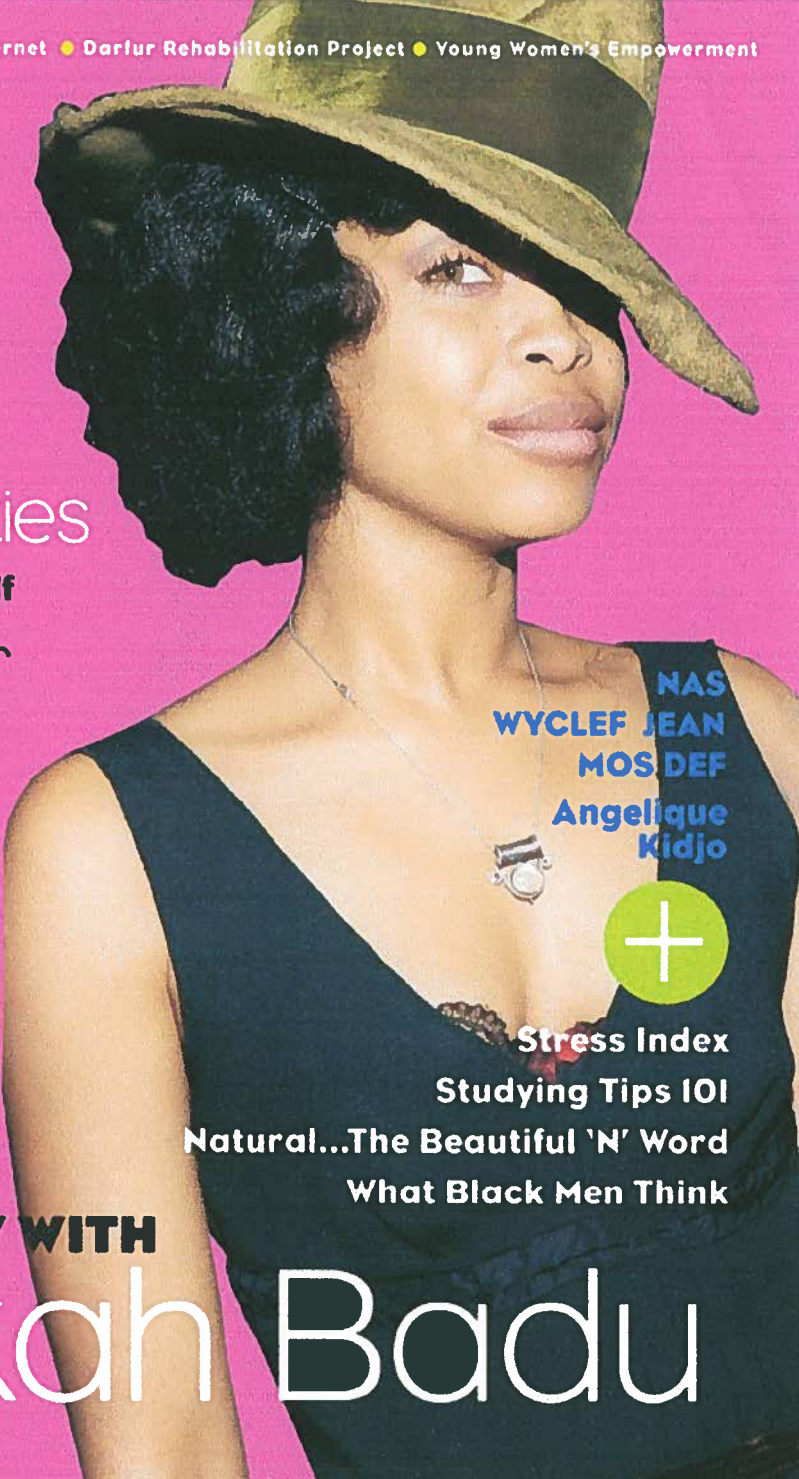
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Sistas in the Struggle: A Movement of Resistance By and For Girls Impacted by the Sex Trade and Street Economies

The girls of Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) take back power and become leaders in their communities through a project like no other.

By Amber Kutka and Dominique McKinney, Youth Staff YWEP

In Chicago, there exists a place like no other, a space where girls are safe to be themselves, a space of resistance. In this project, young women contribute and work regardless of drug use or involvement in the sex trade or street economies. It is a project that is completely dedicated to listening to the needs of young women in the sex trade. Together we develop realistic tools for our lives and communities. It is a safe place where girls ages 12-23 from all over Chicago are leaders, activists, peer outreach workers, popular education teachers and organizers. Wherever we go, Young Women's Empowerment Project creates spaces where we share knowledge, skills, energy and strength. We make a call to all to support our fight, to build our movement and form solidarity with us.

A six year old project and girl-run, YWEP was created to assure that girls and young women of color impacted by the sex trade have a voice and presence at the negotiation table. YWEP is by and for girls who are currently or have been involved in trading sex for money, gifts or survival needs including survival sex and all the other ways girls can be affected by the sex trade and street economies. Girls participate because they want to. We have no requirements, do not need anyone's file, identification, or real name.

YWEP believes that girls and young women of color are especially affected because of racism, sexism, male dominance, ageism, the prison industrial complex, drug war and other systems of oppression. The sex trade and streets economies exist and thrive because of the lack of resources, choices, support, education and respect for girls and young women. We discourage youth and adults from using derogatory language and labels. Just like we discourage the use of criminalizing terms used by the systems.

We train and pay girls to support other girls building networks and sisterhood. In our project young women contribute to our work regardless of drug use or involvement in the sex trade and street economies. It is a project that is completely dedicated to listening to their needs. We want young women to be in control of their lives, to be safe and in charge. We connect individual positive change with positive change in the community.

We respect where girls are at. We support girls by providing a safe non-judgmental and non-condemning environment. When girls come, they feel safe and free of the outside society's judgment and criminalization. This is where they become leaders

and take the power back into their own hands.

Our beliefs are important to us, and our community. We believe in empowerment and to us this means that girls are experts in their own lives. YWEP creates spaces where girls are in charge. Our project is special because we practice harm reduction, which means giving practical options. We respect the choices that girls make, by supporting them. We help girls find safer ways to practice risky behavior; risky means anything that might put a girl in harm. We offer realistic information and we educate. We offer syringe exchange, give out condoms, health information and we help them find any resources girls need.

We practice self care, which means taking care of our body, mind and soul. It is important to take care of yourself mentally, spiritually, and physically, to develop strength and confidence in who you are, what you do, and who you want to become. Before you take care of others, you to have to take care of yourself. Because we are in the sex trade doesn't mean we are less than any other human and deserve the right to any positive change. Don't believe the myths; believe in your own decisions.

Girls do what they have to do to survive. Although society blames us, we call out the systems that are responsible for the oppression faced by girls, young women and youth everywhere. Girls are being oppressed everyday and we are here to fight against misogyny and hold our oppressors accountable. We support all girls building and keeping sisterhood and support their fight for social justice. We fight back because girls are being locked up for trying to survive.

We give real options for real situations. Our youth to youth outreach workers have reached over 700 girls in 2006 alone. They go all over Chicago to their friends, family, and people they've never met before and have the big job of educating people on their self care, rights, health, and safety. If one girl finds out some good information she most likely will share it with others. Outreach has a lot to do with community change because if you make enough people aware in one area change is made.

Our workshops have reached hundreds and hundreds of girls in schools, group homes, foster care facilities and community organizations. Through girls' lived knowledge, we talk and learn about the causes of inequalities and injustices in society, faced by youth impacted by the sex trade and street economies. Our popular education helps us build the tools that support girls' reclaiming their power to fight against injustices.

YWEP has been upholding its commitment to youth leadership in the forefront. We need your continued support! With your solidarity and strength behind us- nothing will hold us back. Write us, ask us questions and check out our website!

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