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Windy City Times

YWEP youth speak out
by Yasmin Nair
2008-04-23

"If you're tired of not being heard, or being overlooked, this is the place for you." With these words, a member of Chicago's YWEP (Young Women's Empowerment Project), and the emcee and host for the evening, opened the evening's speak-out. The event, which took place at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Latino Cultural Center, 750 S. Halsted, was part of the first National Week of Action for Reproductive Justice, launched by the Third Wave Foundation, a feminist organization that focuses on young women and transgender youth. YWEP works with female-identified street-based youth 12-23 involved with the sex trade, whether by choice or for survival.

Approximately 50 youth and a few adults attended the entirely youth-led and -created program, which began with a presentation about the issues facing participants. A YWEP member spoke about the "poor and shitty health care" that street-based youth endure, compounded by medical professionals who either provide little access to contraception or coerce them into having unwanted abortions. In addition, these youth are particularly affected by the combination of parental notification laws and increased criminalization of young people in the sex trade, which doubles their chances of homelessness.

According to Cindy Ibarra, communications coordinator for YWEP, the aim of events like the speak-out was to foster leadership skills in street-based youth who are multiply disenfranchised for their actions; their gender and sexual identities; and their class background. They are also disenfranchised by mainstream organizing around reproductive rights because of structural issues, such as activist meetings are held at times when youth are unable to attend. Performances included short skits by the Empowered Fe-Fes, a group focused on the needs of young girls with disabilities Others read pieces that ranged from the personal—one youth read a poem to a boyfriend—to spoken word performances about child sexual abuse and being kicked out of homes. Also on hand were youth representatives from groups like Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, who urged the audience to lobby against abstinence-only programs; and youth who had experienced abuse in incarceration and/or the mental health system.

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