

# Women and Non-Binary Youth are at the Forefront: The Gendered Leadership of Grassroots Youth Organizing Groups

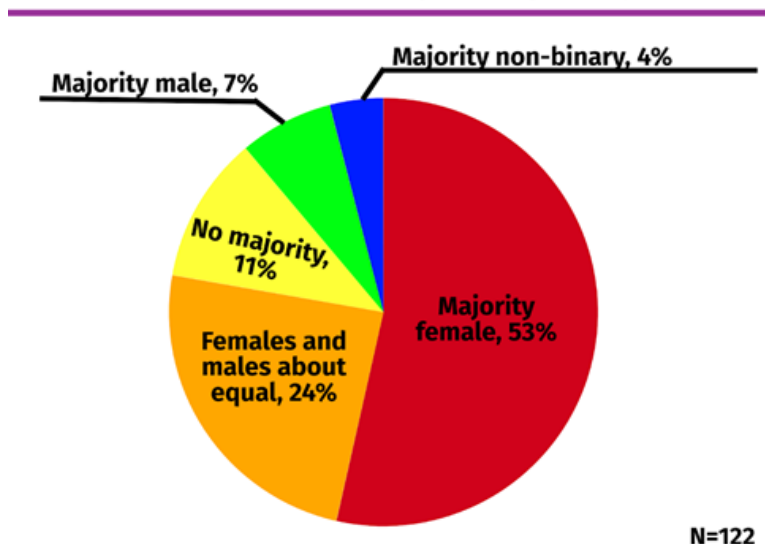
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Celebrating 2021's Women's History Month, this research brief draws attention to the young Black Indigenous and Youth of Color (BIPOC) who have been at the forefront of recent grassroots youth organizing efforts. Young women and individuals who do not identify along the gender binary have been well represented among those who have coordinated mutual aid efforts during the pandemic, fought for racial justice, and advanced other social justice campaigns. The leadership of these young people tends to be characterized by inclusivity and a concern for diverse segments of their communities who are negatively impacted by social injustices.

Since the 1990s, many 501(c)3 nonpartisan grassroots youth organizing groups have been important training grounds for young social movement leaders. These groups engage adolescents and young adults in nonpartisan campaigns for educational equity, environmental justice, health equity, immigrant rights, racial justice, and other issues affecting low-income and marginalized communities. Some also run sophisticated campaigns to get out the vote. These groups number over 300 in the United States today, and nearly 40 percent of them are based in California. Largely located in immigrant, refugee, and BIPOC communities, these groups build on decades-long legacies of community organizing strategies that engage those most affected by social injustices to become part of the solution.

Historically, men have been the face of these movements, even when women performed crucial work, often behind the scenes, by reaching out to and training community members. Today's youth movements tend to have individuals who do not identify as men in visible leadership positions. Collected in partnership with The California Endowment and the Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing, a 2019 survey reveals that over half of the 122 California groups surveyed —53%— report having majority female leaderships.

**Gender Composition of Leaders in  
California's Youth Organizing Groups**



Our observations of campaigns across the state also confirm that girls and young women clearly dominate youth organizing. At the same time, it is noteworthy that 4% of groups (primarily those working on LGBTQ issues) have a majority of non-binary leaders; another 11% indicate that they have no gender majority among their leaders, signaling that non-binary youth make-up a significant proportion.

Women and non-binary youths' leadership reflects broader patterns in the structure of progressive movements, including the Movement for Black Lives and the Undocumented Youth Movement. BIPOC women have also made gains in mainstream politics, including in the 2018 congressional elections. Positive or negative changes in a group's social status can provoke political resistance and alter power dynamics. Thus older white heterosexual men currently dominate social movements on the right, often protesting their loss in power and status, while young Gen-Z and Millennial women and non-binary individuals of color, having experienced relative status gains, are at the helm of this era's progressive movements.<sup>1</sup>

In analyzing 125 interviews with young women and non-binary youth organizers across the state of California, we found that these young people are generally motivated by visions of a better world that are inclusive of various forms of diversity. We believe that this is because many youth organizing groups often prompt their members to think intersectionally, meaning that they encourage their members to consider how multiple systems of oppression (racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia) shape individual and group experiences. A concept initially advanced by Black feminist scholars and informed by decades of activism by women of color, intersectionality orients members to reflect on their multiple identities and how power and privilege (or disadvantage) have shaped their life experiences. This intersectional thinking also encourages young people to consider collective solutions that attend to the complexity of social inequalities affecting different segments of their community. Accordingly, young women and non-binary leaders often seek to include diverse community voices within their organizations and when devising solutions.

California's young leaders include those of all genders, and the extent to which gender equity, gender inclusivity, and women's issues are addressed within these organizations varies. However, we have found that women and non-binary youth tend to take on a disproportionate share of the hard work of organizing. And because it is often, though not always, the case that women and non-binary do not get the credit for these contributions, we wish to acknowledge the dedication of those who are playing vital roles in improving their communities. As part of generations facing extreme economic inequalities, the looming threats of violence and deportation, layered pandemic-related crises, and the existential threat of climate change, these young people realize they must have a voice in shaping the future. The rest of us should listen to what they have to say.



Photo credit: MidCity CAN

**This research is dedicated to Beatriz Solis (1962-2020) who firmly believed in and supported younger women of color as they worked towards the self-determination and well-being of their communities.**

<sup>1</sup> Terriquez, Veronica and Ruth Milkman. Forthcoming 2021. "Immigrant and Refugee Youth Organizing in Solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives." *Gender & Society* 35(4).

California is home to thousands of young people who have been fighting to improve their communities and the lives of those around them. Here we feature a small number of those who are committed to inclusive grassroots organizing that attends to the needs of diverse community members.



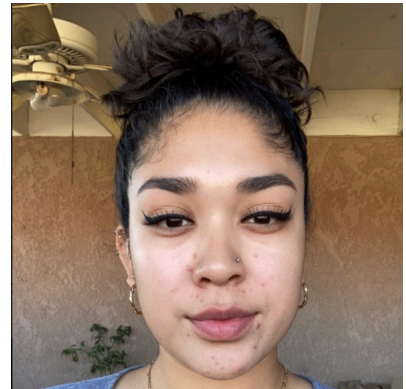
Ngan Ly, Oakland, Age 20 (she/her/hers)

The unfortunate labeling of the coronavirus as the Chinese virus has resulted in more attacks on the API community. This comes on top of all the attacks on Black people, Latinx communities, those who identify as a woman, those who are trans, and those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. As a proud Vietnamese American and Asian-American, I believe we must continue to stand up for our own communities, and leave space to support BLM and other movements.



Mariela Huazano, Mecca, Age 23 (she/her/they/them)

In organizing, it is important to create safe spaces for everyone's identities. As someone who is proud of my Mexican descent, I am aware that in my community, Central American, Black, Indigenous and other QTPOC experiences are not always heard. It is therefore crucial for me to be intentional about including, uplifting people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, genders, and all queer and trans identities other than just my own.



Jenn Heng, Long Beach, Age 30 (they/them/theirs)

I am defining feminism on my own terms, with the nuances and experiences that make up my identity. When I think about feminism, I think about protecting families against deportation; I think about my role in building power in our communities through voting, budget fights, and civic participation; I think about our physical and mental wellness, and protecting our physical and cultural spaces.







Halima Musa, San Diego, Age 21 (she/her/hers)

As a dark-skinned Black woman, a lot of people see me and they automatically assume that I'm not a leader. I am a proud daughter of Bantu Kenyan refugees, a sibling, a woman, a student and, a leader. I find it useful to think intersectionally about who I am, and it reminds me that it is okay for me to express the different sides of myself in order to get the message across and my voice heard.



Citlali Ruiz, Santa Ana, Age 21 (she/her/hers)

I'm loud, and I'm going to take up space. I'm going to let people know I'm here. I encourage other young people to also be loud and be heard. At the same time, I let them know it is important for us to know when to step back, listen, and support others who have less privilege.



Briyana Haas, Tulare, Age 25 (they/them/theirs)

I see myself as a leader who values creating a pipeline that empowers people who are left out of the conversation, including Black youth, trans youth, and youth with disabilities. I believe in centering authentic relationships with youth over transactional ones. Centering youth, and the relationships we have with them, makes sure that we are aiding them in the cause, not taking it over and telling them what to do. Knowing that they are the experts and treating them as such ensures that we will achieve collective liberation for all of us.



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