

IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE YOUTH ORGANIZING IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES

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In recent years, politically active Latinx and Asian American Pacific Islander youth have addressed anti-Black racism within their own immigrant and refugee communities, engaged in protests against police violence, and expressed support for #SAYHERNAME. Reflecting the broader patterns of a new political generation and of progressive social movement leadership, women and nonbinary youth have disproportionately committed to inclusive fights for racial justice. In this essay, through two biographical examples, we highlight the role of grassroots youth organizing groups in training their diverse young members to become effective allies, introducing them to intersectional frameworks that motivate solidarity across racial and ethnic boundaries.

Keywords: *intersectionality; solidarity; youth organizing; immigrants; refugees*

“Indigenous folks are supporting the BLM movement. We’re centering Black, Indigenous, and trans folks because these are the folks that have been attacked time after time. We’re seeing how the police are targeting them and how that filters into Brown lives. Intersectionality is definitely crucial to the movement!”—Citlali Ruiz, Zapotec Indigenous immigrant leader, age 20 (she/her/hers)

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“We are still a young refugee community in the States. We are navigating intergenerational trauma as a collective, and part of that healing for the Southeast Asian community comes from being proactive and addressing anti-Blackness in our community.”—Jenn Heng, Cambodian-American leader, age 30 (they/them/theirs)

Citlali and Jenn are among the many youth organizers who helped mobilize their immigrant and refugee communities in support of the massive Black Lives Matter (BLM) rallies of June 2020.¹ Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, those demonstrations swelled into what may have been the largest protests in U.S. history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). Although led by Black leaders and attracting a majority of White participants in some large cities, these efforts also included significant numbers of Latinx and Asian–Pacific Islander (API) supporters (Fisher 2020), many of them are the children of immigrants and refugees.² As prominent immigrant rights advocate Jose Antonio Vargas told a *Washington Post* reporter, “In forming ‘a new kind of majority’ with black and white protesters, these Asian, Latino and other young allies are uniting in fighting anti-black racism and in many cases, pushing their mothers and fathers to understand why change is necessary” (Trent 2020).

As youthful leaders, Citlali and Jenn are helping define what solidarity can look like for this “new majority.” Drawing on years of previous political experience, they helped mobilize their communities to support BLM and its demands, as they had begun to do well before the eventful summer of 2020. They are part of a diverse generation of young activists, many of them women and nonbinary, who have been working to combat anti-Blackness, promoting solidarity not only with BLM but also with #SAYHERNAME, the campaign launched in 2014 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to call attention to police violence against Black women.

Here, we aim to explain how and why Latinx and API women and nonbinary youths like Citlali and Jenn came to be engaged in this type of solidaristic collective action. Noting the broader patterns of women’s and nonbinary individuals’ leadership in progressive movements, we point to the role of nonprofit grassroots organizations in training their young members to become effective allies, introducing them to intersectional frameworks that facilitated solidarity across racial and ethnic boundaries.

For nearly three decades, youth organizing groups have provided adolescents and young adults with hands-on training (Braxton 2016). Now numbering more than 300 nationally, these groups include Black, Latinx, API (including Southeast Asian), and Indigenous youth. Those based in immigrant and refugee communities help young people and their families

navigate U.S. institutions and overcome linguistic, legal, and informational barriers to political participation (Terriquez and Kwon 2015; Terriquez and Lin 2020). California is home to nearly 40 percent of these groups, many of which attracted early support from Black, Latinx, and API elders involved in civil rights, United Farm Worker campaigns, and union organizing (Terriquez, Sanchez, and Harris-Dawson 2020). Although sometimes constrained by their nonprofit status, these groups train their young members to participate in nonpartisan policy campaigns, voter outreach, and other social change efforts, and to analyze intersecting race, gender, class, and other inequalities.

According to a 2019 national survey, women and nonbinary youth comprise the majority in more than half of youth organizing groups, with queer and trans people well represented (Valladares et al. 2021). Often staffed by female and queer-identified Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), these organizations offer spaces that enable young women and nonbinary individuals to find their voices and develop leadership skills; they serve as training grounds for multiracial alliances that often (though not always) embrace intersectional approaches to social justice.

Grassroots youth organizing reflects the wider social dynamics of 21st-century progressive movements. As we have documented elsewhere (Milkman and Terriquez 2012), women have long played a prominent role as leaders in the immigrant rights movement. More recently, following the 2008 recession, a new political generation launched a wave of protest, including BLM and Occupy Wall Street as well as the immigrant Dreamers movement. BLM was led by young Black women, many of them lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and nearly all of them college-educated (Milkman 2017), making a historic break from earlier waves of anti-racist movements overwhelmingly led by men. As Taylor (2016, 165, 167) has noted, “the face of the Black Lives Matter movement is largely queer and female,” adding that “these organizers are ‘intersectional’ in their approach.” Although BLM initially focused on the murders of Black men, that began to change with the #SAYHERNAME campaign, reflecting the feminist consciousness of many BLM activists.

Changes in a group’s social status can provoke political resistance (Ridgeway 2014). Although older White heterosexual men have dominated social movements on the Right in the 21st century, often protesting their loss in power and status, young Gen-Z and Millennial women and nonbinary BIPOC are at the helm of this era’s progressive movements, representing groups who have experienced relative status gains. Like many other young progressives, young Latinx and API activists see

themselves as part of larger movements committed to fighting multiple forms of oppression.

Local leaders like Citlali and Jenn—in contrast to most children of immigrants and refugees—gained access to political analysis and skills training at an early age through their involvement in grassroots youth organizing groups (Terriquez and Kwon 2015; Terriquez and Lin 2020), laying the groundwork for their later efforts at building BLM’s racially diverse support.

Citlali began learning how to organize at 16 years of age. An immigrant from an Indigenous community in Oaxaca, Mexico, she joined Resilience Orange County (ROC), a youth organizing group based in Santa Ana, CA, a predominantly Latinx city with a large undocumented population. Involving adolescents in immigrant rights and other campaigns, ROC addressed issues relevant to Citlali.

Similarly, at age 14, Jenn joined Khmer Girls in Action (KGA), a Southern California youth organizing group that engages Khmer (Cambodian) youth whose families escaped the genocide in their home country only to face high rates of poverty, violence, legal disenfranchisement, and intergenerational trauma in the United States (Patraporn 2018). First organizing around the issue of reproductive rights for Cambodian girls, KGA went on to fight deportations of Cambodian refugees and to promoting the well-being of the Khmer community.

As members of youth organizing groups, Citlali and Jenn gained an understanding of Black struggles and their connection to the struggles of the Latinx and API communities. As BLM gathered force, Citlali and Jenn offered direct support and helped persuade their families and communities to join in solidarity. Jenn also devoted time to advancing the “People’s Budget,” which embraced BLM’s focus on defunding the police in the city of Long Beach. Their experiences show how youthful exposure to intersectional frameworks and training in grassroots organizing can help advance political action in support of inclusive calls for racial justice.

Sensitized to the unique experience of Blacks in the United States, Latinx and API youth organizers, such as Citlali and Jenn, became BLM allies, addressing anti-Blackness in their own communities and building bridges between their ongoing grassroots campaigns and local efforts to defund the police. They gained legitimacy as allies, having worked for years to advance the rights of people of color, immigrants, and refugees, accumulating knowledge and civic skills that went far beyond participation in protests.

Citlali and Jenn articulated the relevance of #SAYHERNAME for their communities. Concerned with Indigenous women’s femicides in Mexico, Citlali declared: “It is important to name the Black women who have been

killed by the police, to learn about them and their lives. The people fighting against the femicides in Mexico can build on the strategy, come out in support of Black women, and determine how we can protect each other.” Similarly, Jenn stated: “#SAYHERNAME is a demand to resist the erasure of Black women, trans, and femme-of-center folks who have experienced state-sanctioned violence and to honor them by bringing justice to their names. The Southeast Asian community is still struggling to survive every day in this country. For us to lead full lives, we all must actively dismantle patriarchy and white supremacy.” Citlali and Jenn aimed to acknowledge the pain of their own communities while fostering alliances across a wide spectrum of identities.

BLM’s own adoption of intersectional frameworks helped draw attention to the murder of Black women and trans individuals as well as the killings of Black men (Ransby 2018). BLM actively built bridges with the immigrant rights movement, motivated voter turnout, and called for racial justice across a range of communities and institutions. Groups, such as the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, explicitly connected BLM and immigrant rights, acknowledging the disproportionate deportations of Black immigrants (Palmer 2017).

Intersectional frameworks have helped young organizers, like Citlali and Jenn, highlight gender, class, and other inequalities while fighting for racial justice and immigrant rights. Advanced by Black feminist scholars (Crenshaw 1991) and informed by decades of activism among women of color (Collins and Bilge 2020), intersectionality as a theory and a praxis helps explain how multiple identities relate to oppression. It has led diverse young activists to embrace feminisms that reflect their specific understanding of power and privilege, as well as their lived experiences.

“My feminism is about inclusivity, it’s about hearing each other and coming to terms with the fact that we owe so much to Black women,” Citlali explained. Highlighting her own multiple identities as an immigrant, Indigenous, young, a woman, and a first-generation college student, she added “I have the privilege of not being targeted by police to the same degree as my Black peers, and I have the privilege of navigating the world as a cis-gender woman.” This led her to make sure that “Black and trans folks” are centered in efforts to defund the police “because they are the folks that have been attacked time after time.”

Jenn offered a parallel interpretation:

What does feminism mean to Cambodian young women and girls at a time when we have these layered experiences living in under-resourced, over-policed communities, living paycheck to paycheck, our families threatened

by deportation, and fighting for more accessible, equitable healthcare? I would align myself with a version of feminism that is more intersectional, inclusive, and equitable. I think it better reflects my own identity as a second-generation Khmer-American, a child of refugees, and a woman of color who is also currently learning and moving along the spectrum in my own gender expression and identity. There's so many elements to feminism. The idea of control and self-determination is an overarching one, along with autonomy over my body, control over my choices, my physical space and my claiming of cultural space. When I think about feminism, I think of protecting families against deportation, I think about learning about the voting process and making sure our communities are able to exercise their rights and encourage civic participation, I think about protecting our physical space. I am defining feminism on my own terms and considering all the nuances of my experiences.

As a collective action frame, intersectionality can help diagnose social problems, motivate participation, and guide inclusive action (Terriquez, Brenes, and Lopez 2018). But their adoption of this analytical framework only partially explains these young activists' commitment to and on-the-ground support for BLM. Like grassroots community organizing groups involving older adults (Han 2014), youth groups train members to analyze policies, conduct research on issues, coordinate meetings, speak in public, recruit allies, navigate policy decision-making processes at different levels of government, and get out the vote. But in contrast to many adult-oriented grassroots organizations, youth-directed groups address young people's developmental needs and the effects of structural violence. Many groups also offer their members intensive mentoring, support for college and career plans (Terriquez and Rogers 2017), as well as training in culturally informed practices to overcome trauma (Ginwright 2010) and legal exclusion. As a result, members are often inspired to translate their intersectional perspective into concrete acts of support for communities facing multiple layers of social marginalization.

As a former ROC member, Citlali gained invaluable experience taking civic and political action. She participated in grassroots efforts demanding that the Santa Ana Unified School District prioritize school spending on violence prevention. The goal was to counteract punitive approaches to school discipline, which activists believed were contributing to the school-to-prison, and school-to-deportation pipelines and endangering youths' health and well-being. Citlali also became deeply involved in efforts to obtain more city funding for youth programs. Through ROC, she learned to make public presentations, conduct outreach, and plan demonstrations in support of immigrant rights—including a large protest against

then-President Trump's efforts to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that offers temporary legal status to undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as young children.

Citlali drew on these experiences as she supported BLM's campaign for defunding the police. As she leveraged her immigrant rights networks to this end, despite resistance from some older activists, she easily won the support of younger ones who were already seeking to abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), sometimes using the slogan "Defund the Pol(ICE)" in solidarity with BLM. Citlali also helped raise money for BLM protest expenses, coordinated water and snack donations, and convened progressive community leaders she knew to assist with planning. She used her social media accounts to educate her predominantly Latinx network on why they should support BLM. As non-Black people, she explained, "This is our time to show up as allies and support, not be at the front." Importantly, Citlali assisted with planning the protests' street route and safety plan:

We needed to make sure that Black folks, undocumented folks, and young people were not going to be attacked by the police. We had our own internal security to make sure that we were safe, and we had to find more privileged folks—citizens and lighter-skinned individuals—to be responsible for interacting with the police if necessary. As a person who's organized protests involving undocumented folks, I knew how important it is to protect the most vulnerable from the police.

Jenn too drew on their previous organizing experience to support BLM. Having engaged in local politics and multiracial alliance building since they were an adolescent, they helped ensure that youth were at the table making demands that aligned with BLM through the Long Beach "People's Budget Campaign." Having previously trained Cambodian KGA members on city budgets, Jenn helped other community members understand the city budget, prompting them to think through how their taxes might be better spent to reflect their values and needs. In addition to helping facilitate communication among diverse coalition members, Jenn prepared racially diverse youth, including Black youth leaders, to meet with City Council members and speak at public meetings. The Long Beach campaign aimed to disinvest in the police and to redirect funds toward "safety without police terror that is grounded in restorative justice and Black Empowerment" (Long Beach Forward 2021). It also advanced demands focused on housing, health care, language access, job training, investments in youth and senior programming, and legal representation—all to benefit racially diverse, immigrant, and other low-income residents.

Such efforts involve formidable challenges because multiracial alliances are not always easy. Mistakes are made, misunderstandings occur, and young people's strategies do not always win the buy-in of older established leaders. Solidarity efforts may distract attention from the needs of a specific subpopulation (Luna 2016), and immigrants and refugees often have to combat anti-Blackness within their own communities (Poon et al. 2019; Zamora 2016). However, as Citlali's and Jenn's experiences show, Latinx and API young people—deeply affected by social inequalities themselves—have been not only active in advancing racial and gender justice in ways that center Black Lives but also embrace related struggles.

For these two young people and thousands of others, the seeds for civic leadership were planted during their adolescent involvement in grassroots youth organizing groups, where they learned to think intersectionally about their identities, the problems in the world around them, and the potential for inclusive solutions. They were introduced to political processes and developed the skills to take civic and political action in their formative years, when young people typically develop deep political interests and commitments (Flanagan and Levine 2010) and enduring worldviews (Mannheim 1927; Milkman 2017).

The training and support offered by groups, such as ROC and KGA, and others among the 300-plus youth organizing groups across the United States, offer models suggesting how to advance racial justice beyond a mere summer of intensive protest like the 2020 BLM demonstrations. Individuals who participate in social movements at a young age tend to remain politically active (McAdam 1988) and pass on their political commitments to their children (Niemi and Hepburn 1995). In the 21st century, the U.S. Black population is outnumbered by non-Black immigrants and refugees and their children, who themselves experience distinct forms of systemic oppression and violence. These newcomers (as well as more established Latinx and API populations) can be allies in inclusive struggles for racial and gender justice. As Citlali emphasizes when she trains even younger Latinx immigrant youth organizers: "We must acknowledge the role of Black women in fighting for social justice in this country, and how they have paved the way for us."

NOTES

1. Citlali and Jenn are among more than 3,500 California youth who participated in a research project on these grassroots youth organizing groups led by the first author of this article.

2. Survey data show that non-Black supporters were highly sympathetic to BLM's demands. A June 2020 Pew survey found that 77 percent of Latinxs and 75 percent of Asians somewhat or strongly supported the movement (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020). Prior to 2020, BLM had already garnered support in Latinx and API communities. A 2016 survey found that 40 percent of API respondents supported the movement "somewhat" or "strongly," as did a plurality of Latinx immigrants (45 percent) and a majority (53 percent) of U.S.-born Latinx respondents (Merseeth 2018; Zepeda-Millán and Wallace 2018, 102).

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