

**GIRL TALK STATEMENT (April 2011):**  
***LOCKING GIRLS UP ISN'T GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUT WE STILL HAVE TO SUPPORT***  
***INCARCERATED GIRLS...***

Introduction:

Every night, between 25 to 50 girls lay their heads on pillows in 7.5 by 14.5 foot cells at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC). These girls have prior histories of sexual and physical abuse (Bloom et al 2003); they are suffering from depression (Obeidallah and Earls 1999); they are poor, disproportionately from racial minority groups (Moore and Padavic 2010); they transgress gender identity norms and are punished for it (Dang 1997); some are battling addiction; and many are under-educated. These are the young people that society has left behind and wants to erase from our consciousness. The most important thing that we can do then is to insist that young women in conflict with the law be made visible and that their voices be heard.

Across the United States, girls are the fastest growing youth prison population. Due to an over-reliance on the criminalization of social problems in the last two decades leading up to the twenty-first century, arrest and detention rates of U.S. girls soared to almost three-quarters of a million in 2008 (Puzzanchera 2009). By 2009, girls comprised 30 percent of all juvenile arrests. Many observers suggest that youth behavior has not changed during this period; it was society's response to such behavior that had changed. Regardless, the result of our punishing culture is that thousands of young women are shuffled through police stations, detention facilities and probation departments across the nation annually.

Until the 1980s, because the vast majority of arrests and detainees were boys, little attention was paid to young women deprived of their liberty. In the 1990s, policy-makers, criminal legal system stakeholders, and advocates began to press for what they termed "gender-responsive" or "gender-specific" programming to address some of the unique needs of girls in the system. Later the concept of "gender-responsive" programming was expanded to address the needs of LGBTQ youth in the system and of young men (who were also acknowledged to have gender identities).

A Very Short Overview of Juvenile Gender-Responsive Efforts in Chicago

Until the advent of advocacy for a particular anti-prison, pro-peace, multicultural feminist, anti-racist, restorative justice policy approach, the majority of groups who visited juvenile detention facilities (and still do) included evangelical church groups and public health specialists. These groups lectured to detained young women about sexually transmitted diseases, etiquette and pregnancy prevention, ignoring the complex issues and circumstances in these young women's lives.

Our project—Girl Talk—was originally founded in 1993 as a weekly program for girls ages 12-17, locked up at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center in Chicago. It was led in its final years by the amazing energy and beautiful spirit of, now deceased, Wenona Thompson. Incarcerated herself as a young woman at the JTDC, Wenona provided first-hand knowledge of life in the JTDC as well as the ability to relate to the girls. **Girl Talk** disbanded as an organization in 2005.

In 2010, after a conversation with staff at the JTDC, a group of us decided to re-launch **Girl Talk** as a film screening and art-making program based on work that had been done by Laurie Schaffner and her University of Illinois at Chicago students in the summers of 2006 and 2007 at the jail. Currently **Girl Talk** consists of bi-weekly film screenings accompanied by an art project on Saturday afternoons in the Cook County JTDC. The films we have selected feature a young female

protagonist who faces challenges and ultimately triumphs. After the movie concludes, the incarcerated girls and **Girl Talk** volunteers work together in small groups to discuss the movies' themes and work on related art projects. Currently our programming features such themes as family, beauty, and overcoming barriers to success. We seek to continually improve the project as we deepen and expand the curriculum.

## Key Tenets of Our Work

### ***Challenging the Popular Construction of Girls in Conflict With the Law***

Concern about girls' aggression and violence has never been higher due in part to the general public's perceptions that girls' violence is increasing at a remarkable rate. The media has played a central role in this perception, not only showcasing girls' violence, but also providing the public with various "explanations" for this perplexing "new" bad girl or "mean" girl phenomenon. Caricatures produced by the corporate media and Hollywood films such as the unwed pregnant teenager, the welfare cheat, the uncaring, crack-addicted mother, the teen girl in need of an abortion, the helpless rape victim, and the abducted innocent trafficked girlchild stimulate civic discourse and outrage. Yet the true experiences and opinions of girls in trouble with the law from low-income urban communities are often underrepresented and misrepresented in public policy, academic research, as well as the media. It is the central mission of **Girl Talk** to challenge the popular depictions of girls in trouble with the law by insisting that these young women narrate their own experiences in their own voices.

### ***It is NOT "gender-responsive" to incarcerate girls***

**Girl Talk** believes that it is impossible to provide "gender-responsive" services and programming within an inherently oppressive system that exerts brutal social control over its charges. What we know for sure is that any contact with the juvenile justice system is bad for girls. We also take issue with typical "gender-responsive" programs that intend to redirect adolescent young women's socialization processes towards mainstream dominant norms for feminine, law-abiding behavior. The underlying position of the **Girl Talk** curricula is to honor young women and their abilities to grow into strong adults with self-love and purpose.

**Girl Talk** believes that locating the social problem of girls in conflict with the law as individual "poor choices" that girls make, misses the underlying social forces such as homophobia, violence, racism, sexism, and poverty in which young women live. Gender-specific intervention policies are not necessarily feminist, anti-racist, restorative or critical of the status quo. This is where **Girl Talk** enters the policy debates over "what is gender-responsive policy and is it good for girls?" Gender-focused programs fail to address the obvious racial disparity between those on the inside and those on the outside, as well as neglect to notice the violence that poverty inflicts in the lives of incarcerated girls. In so doing they miss the opportunity to provide places where young women can articulate their own truths and to find inspiring solutions to the very real challenges faced by young women who come to the attention of juvenile legal authorities.

Although "gender-specific policy" and "culturally appropriate" approaches to working with youth who have transgressed laws have become buzzwords in official juvenile legal system literatures, very little mention is ever made in juvenile detention facility practice and procedural

manuals that pertain specifically to girls' unique challenges and strengths. Often the only place where girls are mentioned is in outlining specific nutrition needs for those who are pregnant or lactating. Furthermore, criminologist and juvenile delinquency literature authors focus on the individual offender and his/her (in)ability to make positive choices. Deploying a critical multicultural feminist model to understand youth in trouble broadens our perspective towards seeing youth as being *in* crisis, rather than youth being *the* crisis. Thus, our unit of analysis focuses on the juvenile legal system itself, and its punitive approach to dire situations in which children find themselves. This shift provides theoretical and analytic room to deepen our understanding of the ways that unmet social, cultural, educational, physical, mental, and emotional needs of girl children may be linked to later court-involvement.

### ***“We Don’t Want to Make Jails Nicer Places to Cage Young Women”: The Paradox of Doing Work in Detention Facilities***

Many of us (though not all) who are part of the **Girl Talk** leadership team are prison abolitionists. We believe that supporting the prison-industrial complex is not the solution to street-level poverty and suffering. We recognize that a dual trend developed in the late 1990s that raised special public concern: a simultaneous rise in arrests of girls for violent crimes such as aggravated assault in tandem with girls coming to the attention of authorities with severe, chronic, and acute psychological and physical health care needs. Close to 100 percent of young women who come to the attention of legal authorities arrive with unhealed harm from having suffered sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Acoca and Dedel 1998; Alder and Worrall 2004). The unique unmet health needs of girls being processed in juvenile corrections has emerged as a national crisis (Bloom et al 2002; Teplin et al 2006; Cauffman et al 2004). For example, of the 1,300 juvenile detention facilities in the nation, only 37 were accredited by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (Bell 2003). While **Girl Talk** is not designed to directly address this particular crisis among young women who are court-involved, we firmly believe that punishing them by locking them away in secure detention is exactly the wrong method to address the wrong-headed thinking of defunding schools, abandoning a welfare state, and adopting a permanent war economy that derails public funding for services for taxpaying families. The juvenile court system has inherited the results of failed educational, housing, health, economic, and other public systems and is ill-equipped to handle them. As we grow, **Girl Talk**, is committed to providing girl-positive places where, at minimum, these truths can be acknowledged. However, we remain conflicted by the fact that we are not interested in making jail a “nicer” place for girls to reside.

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#### Acknowledgements

CHICAGO GIRL TALK 2010 is gratefully indebted to the original sister founders and especially to the dearly departed Wenona Thompson. **Girl Talk** has been incubated, developed, and supported tirelessly by Project Nia, a grassroots organization that works to dramatically decrease the number of children and youth in Chicago who are arrested, detained, and incarcerated. **Girl Talk** received a 2010 grant from the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute on Research on Race and Public Policy. We have been co-sponsored by the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In April 2011, **Girl Talk** was the recipient of a very special and beautiful benefit event at Q4 Multi-Kulti Gallery thanks to Shiren Belle Rattigan.