FED UP HONEYS

The voice of a young womyn of color ….

I am an interesting young womyn who bores herself to delirium. And a comedian who cant tell a joke. I am a responsible sister and a helpful daughter. I love to be me and yet I am different around others. I am extremely emotional but want to hide my feelings. I have a hard time trusting some and put too much trust into others. This leads to hurt feelings and total vulnerability. I want to be vulnerable but it makes me feel weak. I want to feel weak but no one wants to care for me. I want to care for those I love and want them to care for me more. I never believe anyone can love me as much as I do them. I want to take care of people but don't want them to need me. I am too clingy and never see friends and family. I am a complete idiot but an intelligent person. I am lacking education. I have no communication skills and I am a good listener. I am a good listener who hates to hear people speak. I am a reader who watches way too much TV. I am a good friend and girlfriend but I have few friends and no boyfriend. I am open and bold but hold my tongue when I'm hurt. I put people in their place and yet others walk all over me. I try too hard and yet do nothing at all. I am a procrastinator but I am always early. I help and help and help, and get nothing in return. I am not where I would like to be and want to be so much further. I am very opinionated and yet know nothing about the world. I know where I want to go but I am confused. I know what I want but I am confused. I know how I feel but I am confused. I know what I mean but I confuse myself. I am boring and fun, and innocent and cruel. I am trusting. I am always here. I am always there. I am always needed. I am loved and hated. I am admired. I am spiteful but not jealous. I am very jealous. I am scared of everything. My face shows bravery. I am angry. I am in love. I am confused again… Honestly, I am too much to put into words. – Erica Arenas   2002

**This is an example of how a young womyn describing herself manages to convey the difficulty
and challenge of being a contradiction…
of being many things at once.**

MAKES ME MAD
stereotypes of young urban womyn of color

By Indra Rios-Moore; Shamara Allen; Erica Arenas; Jennifer Contreras; Na Jiang; Tiffany Threatts; and Caitlin Cahill

www.fed-up-honeys.org

MAKES ME MAD:
Stereotypes of young urban womyn* of color

is a project conducted by a research team of 6 young womyn during the summer of 2002 at the Center for Human Environments, The Graduate Center of CUNY. The project is concerned with exploring two related issues:

1. What is the relationship between the lack of resources (for ex. education) in a community and stereotypes of young urban womyn of color? What are the impacts of stereotyping on young womyn's well-being?

2. How do stereotypes effect and reinforce your self-image? your understanding of your peers? and your community?

Significance

Urban environments are typically characterized and described using aggressive terms, such as "loud, violent, dark, and ghetto", and more often than not little attention is paid to the womyn who inhabit the city, influencing the very fiber of urban environments as **mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and granddaughters**. This project was specifically designed to emphasize the everyday lives of young womyn to make the voice that is so often ignored the central perspective through which our community, the Lower East Side, is viewed. We decided to focus on a topic that we felt had a significant impact on the lives of young urban womyn of color around the country. We designed a project that illuminates the prevalent stereotypes of our peers, the relationship of those stereotypes to the development of self-image, and the ultimate negative impact of those stereotypes on the viability and health of our communities

As six young womyn, ranging in age from 16-23, we have decided that our standpoint on the effects of city living, the way we are perceived by others, the

> **How do stereotypes affect you?**

*The reason we spell womyn with a "Y" is because the "correct" spelling of woman and women have the words man and men in them.

stereotypes that result from those perceptions, and the effects of the lack of resources is one that needs to be shared with our peers, our community, the academic community, and the greater public. By sharing our research, our personal stories, and providing a forum for larger discussion **we hope to lift the veil of misinformation about the lives of young womyn of color in the city**, and particularly young womyn on the Lower East Side.

Through extensive discussions we considered the prevalence of mischaracterizations that we have encountered about young womyn of color. These misinformed portrayals of us leave out all of the subtle and unique differences between individual young womyn. Without considering the challenges that we face in our everyday lives, these portrayals further the already stagnated process of improving the living conditions that many young urban womyn of color face.

This cycle of reinforcing stereotypes leads to the ways we as young womyn begin to explain and understand ourselves, and feeds a struggle that has some resisting stereotypes and others using them to interpret the world around them. It is this fierce struggle that gives our work significance. By shining a light on the subtleties and the uniqueness of the everyday lives of young womyn in the city, **we will expose the way stereotypes oversimplify, reduce and limit us.**

Our research focus and questions developed as a result of a series of discussions about the opportunities, constraints, and contradictions that we recognize in our community and research we conducted on our everyday lives and experiences. One of those conversations led us to a realization

that stereotypical profiles of young urban womyn of color are often used by the very organizations that serve them as an approach to programming and fund raising. This oversimplified approach plays into the "culture of poverty"[1] and loses sight of our specific needs. In the interest of appealing to funding sources, proposals are often written as a cost benefit analysis, explicating the reasons why under-servicing young womyn is more expensive and burdensome to society in the long run. These types of proposals repeatedly use hypothetical profiles of young womyn that feed into all of the common negative stereotypes that are prevalent in the media and in society. An example: Taniesha, whose single mother is a high school drop out on welfare, raising her and her two brothers. Taniesha who has little supervision drops out of high school herself, shoplifts and by the age of 16 finds herself with a police record, pregnant and with HIV. We were enraged by reading one particular such profile that was used in a local non-profit report and this helped us to develop our research focus on stereotypes of young womyn of color. We realized that we, as the target audience for preventive and "at-risk" programming, could give a unique perspective on what we feel are our needs by refuting stereotypes directed at young urban womyn of color.

Stereotypes can also be viewed as expectations of who we should be or who we will be. What is expected of us is very little and when we are constantly faced with these negative stereotypes there is a danger that we will become exactly what they want us to become. These stereotypes keep us down, and then our mind set is "If that is what they think I am, that is what I'm going to be."

"If that's what they think I am, that's what I'm going to be."
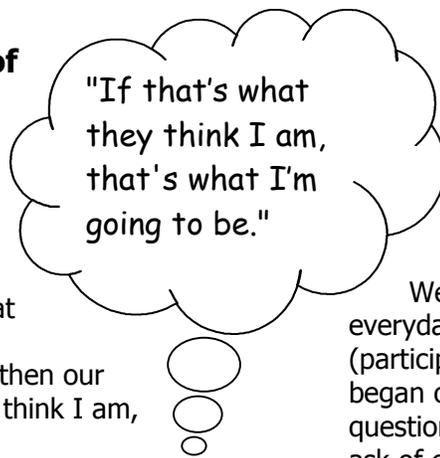
Presumably, the main audience for our research would be people outside of our community because it would be simple to assume that these are the people that are misunderstanding us and are the main consumers of stereotypes of young urban womyn of color. But over the course of our discussions we came to the very difficult realization

The 6th Boro is the Lower East Side and exemplifies the strength and potential of the community.

that we too were consumers of these negative stereotypes, so we decided that our primary audience should be our peers. If we only communicated with outsiders that presumes that our peers (and ourselves) don't have the level of agency needed to make change to the predominant perceptions of us and we strongly disagree with that belief.

Methods

During our time spent in the Graduate Center, we conducted research using many different methods including focused discussions, participant observation, and archival research.

We conducted research on our personal everyday lives. Because we are subjects (participant observers) as well as researchers, we began our project by developing a list of research questions that we could answer ourselves as well as ask of other young womyn our age that live in our neighborhood. Questions included: What is a stereotype? Can you give us some examples?; Have you had to deal with stereotypes against you? If so, what were they?; What are stereotypes of young urban womyn of color that you know about?; Do you think that the stereotypes describe you?; If so, how does it work or not work for you?; How do you fight stereotypes? How do stereotypes make you feel? How does it make you feel about your neighborhood/community?; What are the resources that you think your community lacks?; and How does that affect your lives?

---

[1] Theories of the "culture of poverty" argue that some groups of people stay poor because of things they do—their behavior and lifestyle choices. Our contribution to this debate: We resent this and we refuse to take the blame for our own poverty and the poverty of our community.

We also did questionnaires, time-logs, self-descriptions, and identified the challenges that we face, concerns, opportunities, and constraints in our lives and neighborhood. We mapped our community, and went on a field trip around our community, identifying spaces that were significant to us and reflected on some of the issues we had pinpointed during our group discussions.
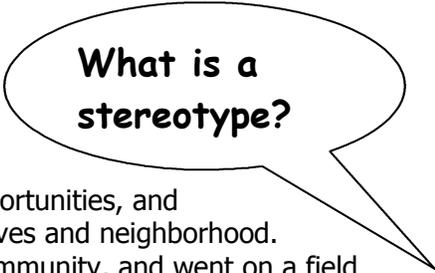
What is a stereotype?

We conducted archival research on our neighborhood. We read reports written by local non-profits in our neighborhood; Community Board #3 FY'2003 District Needs Statement; we conducted internet research on the Lower East Side and the available resources for young womyn; we met with Neil Smith, author of <u>The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City</u>; Yasser Payne and Tamir Stevens, CUNY Graduate Center researchers on the lives of young urban men; and Rosemarie Roberts on her research on dance and history.

<u>Findings</u>

Data collected was focused on addressing the issue that we made the center of our project, the way in which reinforcing stereotypes leads to how young urban womyn explain/ characterize/ understand themselves and others and by extension, negatively effects their communities.

In order to explore and investigate we first identified the prevalent stereotypes.

Stereotypes related to our sexuality and body type:

Promiscuous
Oversexed at a young age
Likely to become pregnant
Not a virgin before marriage
Whores/fast
Trashy dresswear
Have "fat asses"
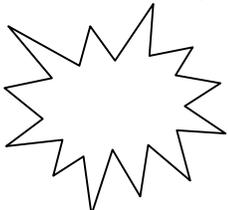
Stereotypes related to our perceived intelligence:

Uneducated
Undereducated
We don't speak "proper" English

We don't know how to solve our own problems
Ambitionless
Simple

Stereotypes related to our supposed class level:

Poor
Unemployed
Lazy
Welfare dependent

Stereotypes related to our behavior:

Unable to protect ourselves
Too emotional
Sloppy
We act like animals
Loud and obnoxious
Boisterous
Talk too much
We can't go anywhere because we don't know how to act
Immature
Have crack babies
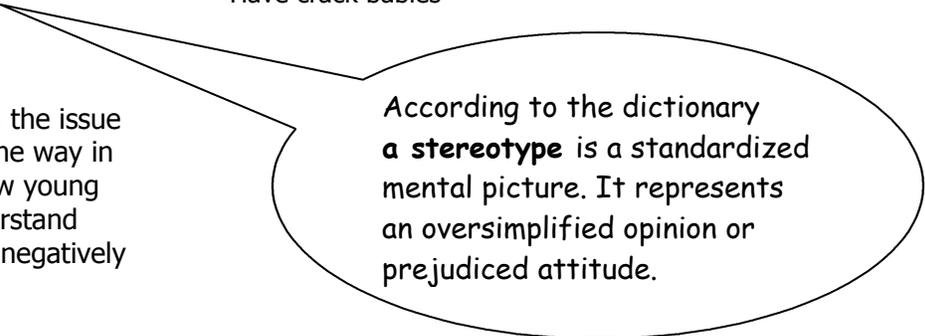
According to the dictionary **a stereotype** is a standardized mental picture. It represents an oversimplified opinion or prejudiced attitude.

Stereotypes related to our relationships:

Dependent on men
Don't understand men
Involved in abusive relationships
Not able to have trust other womyn
Womyn who fight for womyn's rights are feminist and/or lesbian and will end up alone

What do the stereotypes leave out?

It's clear that **these stereotypes are very limited in their scope and unable to fully encompass the complexities of individual lives**. From our own research (our self-descriptions and focused discussions) and from conversations with other

young womyn, we identified some of the specific aspects that stereotypes are insensitive to.

The stereotypes leave out:

- **background**
- **struggle**
- **lack of support**
- **the inherent diversity of every womyn**
- **the abuse that some womyn face**
- **the challenges the young womyn sometimes face that leave them in compromised stereotypical situations**
- **the aspects of life that make this more complicated**
- **the true multi-faceted stories of how/why negative things happen to young womyn**
- **the ability for young womyn to think for themselves**

• everything that makes each life special and unique!

The ways young urban womyn relate to or resist stereotypes:

As the above-mentioned caricatures are out in the world being manufactured and emphasized in the media, music, magazines, etc., young womyn begin to see these stereotypes as the only options for projecting themselves and they become the axis around which everything revolves. Young womyn define themselves against and/or through stereotypes.

"I'm Puerto Rican, I can't speak proper English"

We found that an analysis of our research of our own lives--our self-descriptions--provided ample examples of how we use, relate, and resist stereotypes. Researcher Erica Arenas shared, "Sometimes, as a defense mechanism, people will adopt stereotypes as their own. If you take the stereotype and make it yours then there is no way that it can be used against you. When we do this we sometimes lose sight of the negativity in the stereotype and we begin to use these stereotypes

This mural, "Every Day is Mother's Day", pays respect to the mothers and strong women of our community.

as our excuses for why we are the way we are and why we do the things we do. For example: "Don't make me get black up in here" or "I'm Puerto Rican, I can't speak proper English"."

In her self-description, researcher Shamara Allen shared, "[I am a] **bearer of life, lover, fighter, mad, mad, mad, self-involved...a member of an African-American family, a slave's great, great granddaughter, troubled, angry, thoughtful, Black, stereotypical, a statistic.**" By combining words that are contradictory and connected she simultaneously sheds and uses the stereotypes to describe the way she views herself and the way she thinks she is viewed from the outside. By doing so she acknowledges the connection of perceptions with the way she constructs a self-image.

Researcher Indra Rios-Moore writes: "I am a Black Latina without the characteristic figure that goes with skin as brown as mine and I struggle with that." Recognizing that there is a stereotypical Black body shape, and that to some degree she has bought into that picture of beauty she reveals an inner dialogue and struggle over what that means about how she feels about her own body.

What kinds of negative affects on young womyn and the community do these stereotypes have?

Again, **stereotypes can also be viewed as expectations of who we should be or who we will be.** The lack of space to define

ourselves not only affects our own self-image but also the way we perceive our peers through the stereotype. In a nutshell: If you can't see yourself for who you are because you have an aggressive wall surrounding you- you probably can't see others for who they are. This relationship to aggressive stereotypical behavior is naturally defensive, leaving peer against peer, without allies or understanding. Stereotyped youth are left in a reactive position instead of being able to have control over how they are defined.

Due to the stereotypes that are already being circulated out in the world, impoverished communities that are the supposed producers of the stereotype are seen as self-destructive and are thus often under-funded because the investment is seen as a waste. The assumptions about the lack of potential serves to initiate a cycle by which the lack of resources help to produce the stereotype. **Is a funding stream likely to invest in a community that is viewed as being self-destructive and negative?**

Pollution from the Con Edison plant affects Public Housing residents living nearby.

What are the resources that the Lower East Side community lacks? And how does the lack of these resources affect young womyn's lives?

Community organizations, the Community Board, our focus groups, and our research team all tend to agree that the Lower East Side community needs better funded schools, more low income housing, funding for heavily used community programs, and better sanitation. While many non-profit funding proposals tend to address the need for anti-smoking

and pregnancy prevention programming we feel that those needs are but the tip of the iceberg. **Here we are offering a more preventative approach that identifies needs that are specific to our community.** We want to emphasize connections between the lack of resources and the impact on the lives of young urban womyn of color.

The real effects of the lack of...

Education:
The stereotype of young urban womyn being uneducated is often predicated by the fact that many urban schools that are populated by "minorities" are **under-servicing** their population, with **little resources to facilitate the learning of urban youth**. Often, the depressive school environment leads some urban youth to dropout in an effort towards self-preservation. Once young urban womyn leave school their ability to earn a living wage is decreased and their already impoverished living conditions are worsened or at the very least become more difficult to improve, which reinforces the stereotype that most of us are poor and welfare dependent.

Health:
We are concerned about our environment and our health. The fact that the Lower East Side does not have adequate garbage pickup –leading to rodent infestation and garbage on the street—does not reflect **our desire for healthy and beautiful surroundings**. Not only is it unhealthy (the Lower East Side community has serious environmental health issues), it is also demoralizing to live in an environment that is not cared for. The fact that many members of low-income communities cannot afford health care does not mean that they do not care for their health. But is does reinforce a sentiment that perhaps low-income community members are not worth the expense of care. The lack of allocated resources feeds into a cycle of deprivation in which low–income communities internalize these issues and in turn abuse themselves, blame themselves and feel out of control.

Employment:

Without job access, training, and minimum wage enforcement, many youth are left with very few constructive and legal ways to occupy their time or earn money during summers, and are not encouraged to look into future career and educational opportunities. The recent cuts in summer youth programming/jobs is a case in point. This inevitably leads young people into **a succession of jobs that are underpaying** (if they are able to get jobs at all), having little opportunity for upward mobility or growth and may even force some to illegal means of support.

Housing:

Without well paying jobs it is impossible to be a contributing member of your community and pay the increasing rents that come along with gentrification. To stay in the community that they love and know many are forced to live with more than the permitted number of people in small apartments. When all else fails they are forced into a cold and harsh shelter system with too high a need and a limited number of beds. **Overcrowded homes are not good studying environments** for young people. This affects our education. High rents increase anxiety levels in the whole family and also means that every member of the family, including young school aged womyn, works to help pay the bills.

Money:

As young womyn **we are also concerned members of a community that has financial needs that deeply effect our wellbeing and the available opportunities**. What impoverished communities are lacking most greatly is financial investment that gives them a chance to serve each other and create mutually beneficial financial relationships. Small businesses that are owned by community members will most likely be more tied to the surrounding community and more likely to hire people from that community; but without opportunity to get loans due to lack of capital, those businesses can not exist. Financial education and micro-lending institutions that are committed to investing in the area will help to remedy the effect of low-income community disinvestment.

Our community can be so beautiful!

In Conclusion

The ultimate and most beneficial means to an end of the negative effects of such a stark lack of resources is **a community that is self-sufficient and self-concerned**. It is a priority to have young womyn who can feel connected and have a desire to contribute and be involved in their community. But there have to be ways to become involved in the community.

Our research, the community board, our informal conversations with other young womyn in our neighborhood, and archival research has identified several important ways to build a stronger and more positive community, one that is able to stand in the face of the stereotypes that its children have been pegged with.

Community building needs
from young womyn's perspective

- Better support systems for youth and families.
- A feeling of being welcomed
- A place where youth can hang out and know for sure that they are safe, welcome, and cared for that is operated by people that they can relate to.
- A centralized information center where young people can go to find out what resources are available to them.
- Programs and loosely organized recreation centers that don't have forced activities.
- Places for children to play that are safe, clean, and better maintained.

- Schools that better equip youth with the basic academic skills they need and provide an alternative support system to the family.
- Trustworthy policing and better safety measures that are less imposing on the community.
- Family training programs that help to guide families in learning how to communicate with each other and cultivate nurturing relationships.
- Free counseling and family therapy that is sensitive to cultural aversions to outside intervention.
- Strengthened tenant patrols.
- Closer subway stops and increased bus service as well as manageable fares.
- Increased senior citizen and free meal programs.
- Preservation of affordable performance and workspace for local artist and community groups
- Preservation of gardens and other open spaces that add to the character of our community.

WE NEED:

1. Teachers that young community residents can relate to (currently the majority are white/outsiders to our community), learning/teaching resources that young women and men of color can relate to and opportunities for families to be a bigger part of the school process for their children

2. Drug treatment programs that stress alternatives to incarceration, instill hope, and that are designed to be culturally sensitive.

3. Increased funding for year round job skills and employment programs for youth.

4. More low-income housing. The 80/20 mixed income housing that sets aside 20% occupancy for low income tenants is not enough.

5. Free debt and money management programs, and increased access to low interest small business loans.

Researcher Erica Arenas sums up an important issue for us: "**Our community lacks centers where teenagers can be themselves without having to worry about so many pressures**. Places where they can just relax and chill with friends. A place where they are offered opportunities for their future, which educates them on the opportunities waiting for them and what they are capable of accomplishing; **a safe and comfortable place**."

"Safe and comfortable" is defined as a space where deficit models are left at the door, where no one is trying to shape us to their agenda following a very reductive outsider/missionary approach that aims to "save" young womyn rather than provide opportunities for us to use our own natural gifts for **SELF empowerment**. A safe and comfortable space is organized by members of our own community and is fully integrated with our community.

If we cannot yet get this "safe and comfortable place" that our community's youth are in such dire need of, we decided that we should at least start by creating a safe and comfortable virtual space.

By creating the fed-up-honeys website **www.fed-up-honeys.org** we hope to encourage expression and foster a space that will give peers and youth alike a chance to voice themselves, challenge, and complicate the stereotypes and misconceptions of our peers and communities.

Through the fed-up-honeys website and our sticker campaign we want to stress **the importance of self-directed and community supported action for change**. Using the vehicles of action research, research products such as our stickers, and the website we want to help in the process of motivating and taking part in a revitalization of active community participation. We believe that by simply living your truth and encouraging others to do the same, you can participate in your community's growth. In the process of being true to yourself and the network of people that make up your community **you can help to knock down the myths that hold our communities down**.

Poor public
education
and
resources

↓
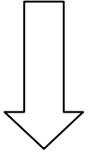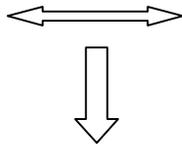
illiteracy ←→ Lack of job opportunities

↓

Low wages

↓
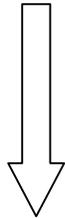
Re-asserts
stereotype:
ambitionless

This stereotype is associated with young womyn of color and viewed as inherent. The perception of young womyn of color as ambitionless is not only a violent mischaracterization, it also represents a serious misunderstanding of young womyn, leaving an indelible mark on their psyches and thwarting the likelihood of outsiders ever getting a glimpse of their true capabilities.

The relationship between failing institutions and the individual sets external and also internal standards for young womyn of color, one informing the other.

individual
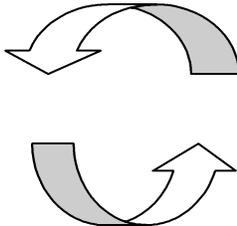
institution

Too often young women take responsibility for failing institutions that underserve and undereducate them, leading to a personal sense of failure.

Community building needs according to young womyn

Here is a list of resources that are lacking on the Lower East Side that we developed from our research. We present these needs as a first step towards taking **action** and **making change**...

What do YOU think?

Please let us know!!! We will post your opinion on our website

www.fed-up-honeys.org

e-mail us at:
all_honeys@fed-up-honeys.org

Education Needs

- Preservation and restoration of local libraries and increased funding for multi-lingual and multi-cultural library programming Increased funding for affordable daycare.
- Increased funding and resources to improve the quality of public education and student attendance programs.
- Increased education health facilities, health and wellness, child abuse awareness, elder abuse awareness, and domestic violence programs.
- Increased funds for public health outreach and prevention programs to raise community awareness.
- Information about important women that are not characterized as feminists.
- Lack of resources in school – more enrichment programs.
- Information about important women in our community or lives reflected in education programming.
- Teachers that young community residents can relate to (now the majority are white), resources that relate to young women and men of color, opportunities for families to be a bigger part of the school process for their children.
- Literacy programs to combat the insufficient schooling.
- Smaller schools. The recent trend of housing many smaller boutique schools in one building still has the same problems of warehouse schooling.
- Getting to college is one issue, but staying is another. College Prep programs that help youth deal with negotiating the systems that are already at colleges for people who have knowledge of them from the start. Prep programs that help new students from the community negotiate classist structures, culture shock, develop study habits, build credit, negotiate school loans, financial aid, and make the best use of the resources that are supplied by college. A support system for kids once they get there.
- Programs for children with learning disabilities, which are designed against the traditional Special Education model.
- Ethics courses

What else? …... what do you need?

Health Needs

- Increased sanitation
- Health centers
- Drug treatment programs that stress alternatives instill hope and that are designed to be culturally sensitive and directed.
- Free health care for all students, including dental.
- **What else? …**

Employment Needs

- Increased funding for job skills and
- employment programs for youth.
- Enforcement of minimum wage and job safety regulations.
- Internship programs that are career oriented.
- Summer programs that offer employment and activities.
- Stronger job development programs and vocational training programs as well as legitimate 2-year vocational colleges that are free or of low cost
- Apprenticeships that lead to jobs.
- **What else? ….**

Housing Needs

- Space for kids to stay in case of dire need, emergency housing that is not a "shelter".
- Increased funding for new and existing housing.
- More low income affordable housing
- **What else? …**

Money

- Free debt management programs
- Low interest small business loans and
- access to money management courses.
- **What else? …**

We <u>really</u> are interested in **your** point of view.
We will include your comments on our website.
e-mail us at: all_honeys@fed-up-honeys.org

Or tear this off and send it to us in the mail:
Fed-Up-Honeys / Center for Human Environments
City University of New York, Graduate Center
365 Fifth Avenue, 6th floor   New York, NY 10016

What are your needs? What are the most important issues to you in your community? Why?

_____

_____

your name: _____ age:_____
please include your contact information (e-mail or snail mail address)

Stereotype Stickers

By now we are assuming, or at least hoping, that most of you have come across one or more of our "Stereotype Stickers" which are up around the entire Lower East Side and other parts of the city.

Most advertisements seen on public transportation and around the city are discriminatory and sexist, so what we created is something mocking those ads but instead of selling you sex, we're making you think.

Those of you who have spotted them must be wondering exactly what our motive is with these "Stereotype Stickers". That's simple. We are looking to plant a seed in the minds of society. We wanted our stickers to upset you to the point of inspiration. We want our beautiful, young, urban womyn of color to realize what it is we have against us and we hope it will give you all the motivation to go against the grain; to prove everyone wrong. If you are checking out the web site or are reading our newsletter right this very second, then our job is half done. From this point on it is completely up to you to decide whether or not you are willing to accept these stereotypes or reject them.

Be smart. Be independent.

Be strong. Be womyn.