



# Essence of Us.

A STRENGTHS-BASED STUDY ON BLACK WOMEN,  
FEMMES, AND GIRLS IN OMAHA – PART 2

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COLLEGE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND COMMUNITY SERVICE  
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# Executive Summary

In this report, we aim to honor and uplift Black women, femmes, and girls by sharing stories, experiences, and ideas to help build a path forward so we can access and reach our full potential. We know that following the guidance of Black women, femmes, and girls will influence and transform the way service providers, funders, and policymakers support, invest and work alongside us.

Experiences described by Omaha’s Black women, femmes, and girls (BWFGs) echoed prior Part I findings yet also revealed unique considerations.

- Similar to the findings of **Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected**, Black girls locally reported school and work environments limited their advancement and pushed them towards unrewarding pathways.
- Local Black trans women are actively fighting to protect their existence, as are Black trans women around the country according to **A Time To Act: Fatal Violence Against Transgender People in America**.
- As suggested in **Pocket Change: How Girls of Color Do More with Less**, Black women, femmes, and girls flourish when we invest in their success.

This report presents overarching themes that came from being in conversation and space with Black women, femmes, and girls discussing their journeys navigating the contours of race and gender.

# Introduction

Inspired by the previous work of Grantmakers for Girls of Color<sup>1</sup>, I Be Black Girl (IBBG) and the University of Nebraska at Omaha STEPs (UNO STEPs) seek to shed light on the experiences of Omaha’s Black women, femmes, and girls (BWFGs). This project explores what it means to be a Black woman, femme, or girl living in the Omaha metro. Attempts to fully capture the essence of BWFGs often fail because we are denied the power to define ourselves. Instead, understanding is based on outside observations or the aggregate experiences of women and Black people. When this occurs, Black women, femmes, and girls’ particular experiences are overshadowed by those of our racial and gender counterparts.

As BWFGs we recognize we are the experts of our lives and are best situated to educate others on our lived experiences, including the support we deserve to maximize our full potential. This report intentionally centers the voices of Black women, femmes, and girls by relying on our knowledge to make meaning and discover areas of opportunity for stakeholders and advocates to target their efforts. Additionally, data collection typically uses a binary approach to gender identification (i.e., male or female) and, in doing so, excludes people

whose gender identity goes beyond this narrow view. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau, the primary agency tasked with collecting data on the U.S. population, offers respondents the options of “male” and “female” when reporting demographics and does not distinguish between sex and gender<sup>2</sup>. The current project demonstrates an inclusive research approach by intertwining narratives that reflect the multiple dimensions of Black femininity into a single report.

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**I Be Black Girl Leads:  
Sarena Dacus & Ashlei Spivey**



# Summary of Key Findings

**Black women, femmes, and girls are proud. Proud of their individuality, heritage, and the legacy of their ancestors.**

They define themselves with empowering terms and refuse to let their light be dimmed by those who are intimidated by their presence.

**We persist in spaces not designed for us**

including navigating isolating environments.

**Black women, femmes, and girls are considered partners in effective organizations.**

Their leadership and input are integral components of program development, implementation, and evaluation.

**Black women, femmes, and girls belong to a sisterhood that transcends space and time.**

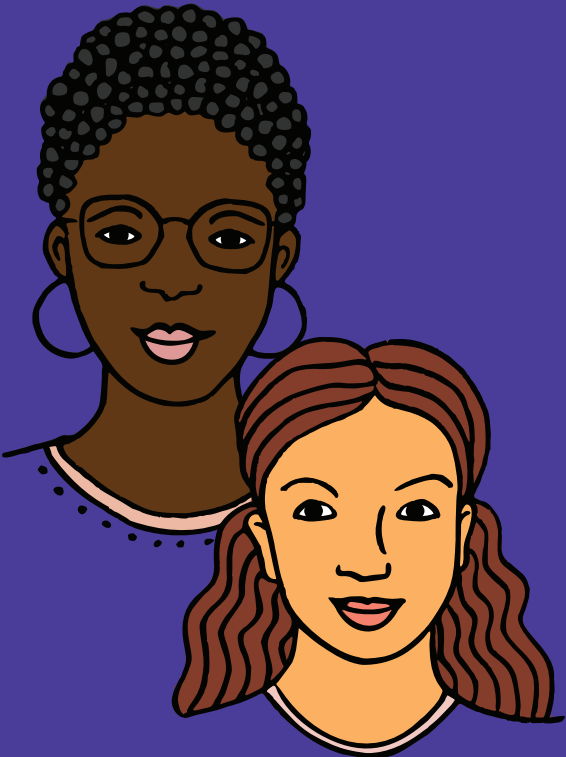
They thrive when surrounded by community, are invigorated by relationships with others, and uplift those around them.

**Black trans women actively navigate varied expectations surrounding their womanhood.**

They skillfully balance maintaining belonging outside and within the trans community while refusing to let gender misconceptions define their lives.

**Black girls are liberated.**

They promote innovative ways of thinking about femininity and expect respect without stipulations.



# Recommendations

- 1.** Create environments where Black women, femmes, and girls can connect and be their authentic selves without the threat of harm.
- 2.** Promote Black women, femmes, and girls' missions to be educated and empowered on their own terms.
- 3.** Disrupt systems that limit potential, access, opportunity and influence.
- 4.** Let Black women, femmes, and girls lead when developing programs, policy, and research.
- 5.** Commit to being an intentional ally and co-conspirator for Black women, femmes, and girls.
- 6.** Recognize Black women, femmes, and girls as invaluable contributors in all spaces.



# Capturing the Knowledge of BWFGs

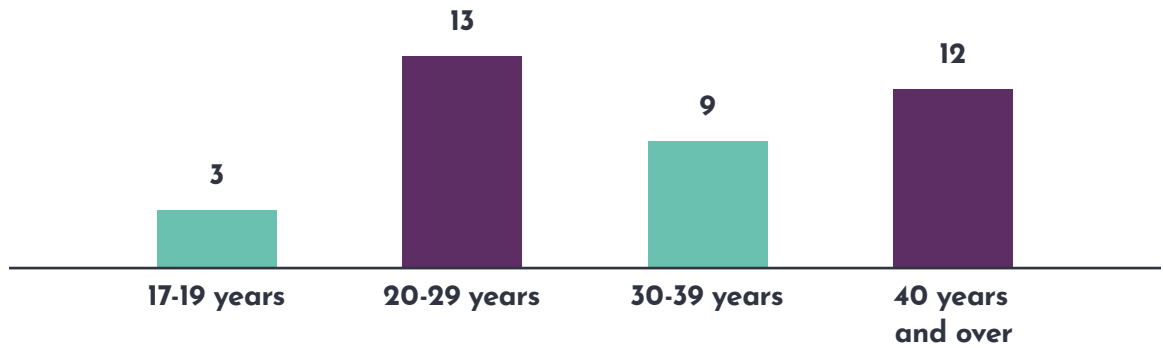
The current report presents the knowledge and wisdom shared by Black women, femmes, and girls from the Omaha metro in the Fall of 2020 during small group and one-on-one interviews. Findings are based on 20 individual and small group interviews. Knowledge was gathered from participants representing an array of backgrounds.

## Participants ranged in age from 17 to 77 years old, with 81% between 18 and 54 years old.

- Participants’ educational levels ranged from “some high school” to “graduate degree,” with 68% reporting having a college education.
- Small group participants represented 16 zip codes across the Omaha metro.
- Length of residency in Omaha, NE, varied from 2 to 66 years.
- All industry interview participants had a college degree and worked in business, education, healthcare, or philanthropy.
- Organizational interviews were completed with programs offering health, education, and community programming services.

Additional information on sampling and the data collection process can be found in Appendix A.

### Participant Ages



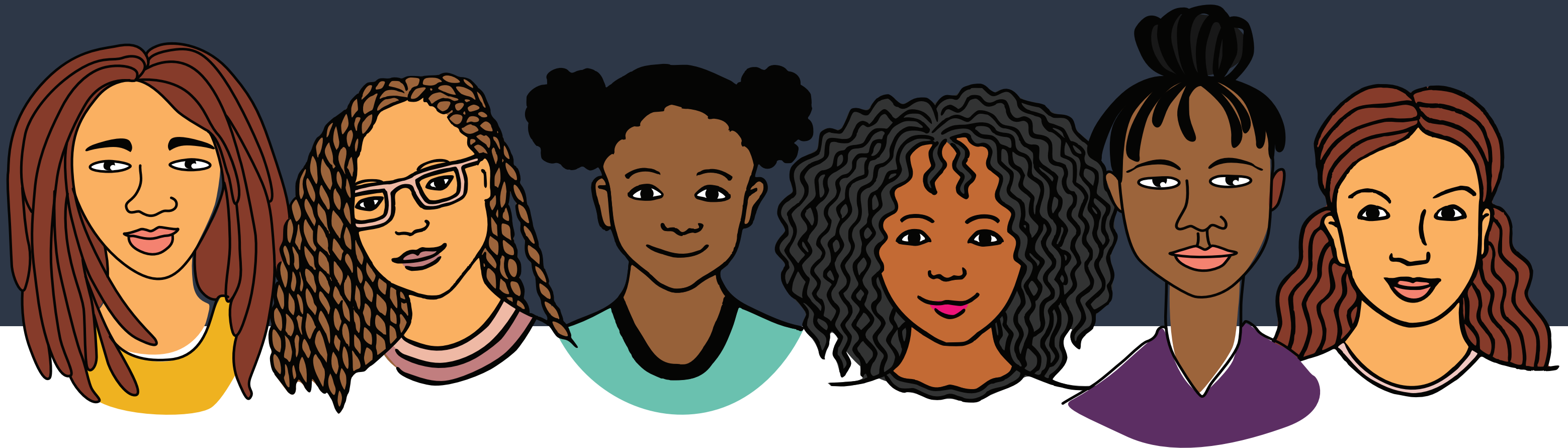
### Research Limitations

1. Following local COVID-19 safety measures, STEPs used video conferencing to meet with participants. Individuals who did not have access to technology or who were uncomfortable with the interview format may have been unintentionally excluded from participation.
2. Due to a limited timeframe for data collection, all Black women, femmes, and girls interested in participating could not do so, as evidenced by people continuing to volunteer after data collection was complete.
3. Despite conscious efforts to reflect multifaceted narratives of Black femininity, most participants were cisgender adults. Most participants reported having a college education, indicating higher socioeconomic status.



# Key Findings

Conversations revealed stories and narratives that offer a glimpse into the complexities of identity and gender.





# Key Finding:

Black women, femmes, and girls are proud of their individuality, their heritage, and embrace the legacy of their ancestors.

Black women, femmes, and girls are vibrant, multidimensional, and insist others must understand there is no one way to be a “Black woman.” They proudly embrace their identities and the joys of their existence. Focus group participants used

empowering words such as “divine,” “courageous,” “beautiful,” “powerful,” and “revolutionary” when describing what it means to be a Black woman, femme, or girl (see Figure 1). One participant asserted,

“[Being a Black woman] it’s just, I wouldn’t trade it. It’s just, it’s beautiful. [Y]ou know, it’s trying at times, but it’s a beautiful experience, it’s a unique one. It’s something to be proud of.”

- A Proud Black Woman



Figure 1: How BWFGs describe themselves

Participants provided examples of how they use ingenuity and persistence to positively impact their families, communities, school, and work environments. Multiple participants suggested BWFGs’ ability to maximize resources and manifest change results in them being an inspiration for others despite, at times, their contributions going unrecognized. Participants also acknowledged non-BWFGs are routinely uncomfortable with their self-confidence and prefer when BWFGs minimize themselves. Nonetheless, BWFGs recognize their value and self-worth.

BWFGs’ lives are shaped by Blackness and womanhood, but also age, interest, location, personal

values, and numerous other characteristics. They place value on being understood as individuals within a collective group. BWFGs refuse to accept stereotypical representations of Black womanhood as their reality. Group members shared they consistently resist external pressure, from both within and outside the Black community, to conform to narrow representations of Black culture. Simultaneously, they refuse the need to assimilate to White standards of being to gain access to professional opportunities. Instead, they choose to live their lives authentically and are unashamed of who they are. One elder shared the following wisdom,

“Acting white, becoming white, that doesn’t change the fact that you’re a Black woman, and that’s how the world’s going to see you. And that’s who I am. And that’s something to be celebrated and nothing to look down on or be ashamed of.”

- Elder Black Woman

Ultimately, participants urged others to fully embrace the depth and range present within Black

culture and in being a Black woman, femme, or girl.

## Key Finding:

Black women, femmes, and girls navigate isolating environments.

Each day, Black women, femmes, and girls strive to succeed in spaces ill-equipped to facilitate their growth. They question policies and practices that foster insecurity by privilege a person's proximity to Whiteness and traditional feminine traits.<sup>4</sup> For example, participants discussed challenging expectations to manipulate their natural hair in order to meet professional standards. Both Black girls and their parents reported discriminatory encounters in the school environment. Black youth recounted defending themselves against teachers' intentional hostile treatment. In comparison, Black adult women and femmes discussed refusing to accept disparate treatment and pun-

ishment of Black girls in their care. Overall, their experiences echoed those described by Black girls throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> Also similar to national findings, local Black trans women reported how they courageously confronted harassment at work and school when left unprotected by anti-harassment policies.<sup>5</sup>

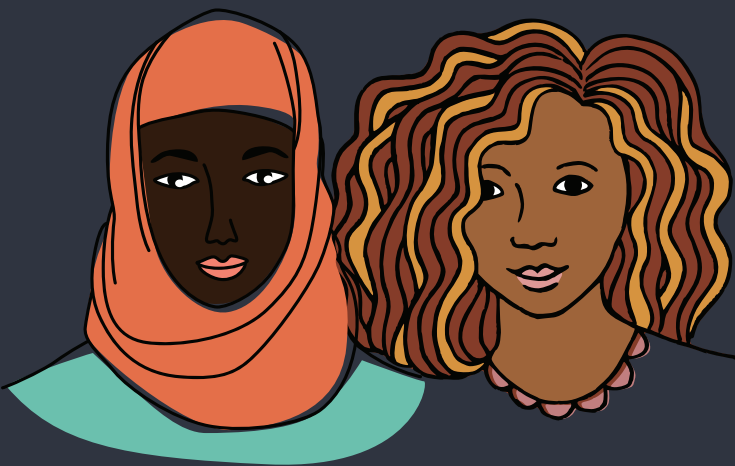
BWFGs persist in alienating work and school environments that attempt to sew self-doubt about their belongingness. Participants described encountering gendered racism and discrimination reflected in their strengths being distorted, low achievement expectations, and their work being devalued while in pursuit of greatness. In all 20 small group and individual interviews, participants detailed how BWFGs are stereotypically portrayed as inarticulate, unskilled, or lacking merit. Yet, Black youth participants encouraged others to push them to "dream big" and support their efforts to broaden their educational and career aspirations. Even when overlooked and underestimated, group members recounted maintaining high standards of excellence and striving to reach their full potential. An example provided by one participant included,

"One of my good friends started the first [business of its kind] in Omaha. And every time she goes to a White community – everyone is just so surprised that she was able to get the money. And so surprised that it looks so nice. It's like they expect you, as a Black woman, not able to do well, not able to succeed. And she's actually getting tired of that. She's like, 'It's exhausting always having to explain my success. Like why would you expect anything different for me because I'm a Black woman?'"

- Advocate of a Black Woman Entrepreneur

Overall, BWFGs strategically address oppression by alternating between conformation and resistance but recognize continuously fighting for validation is "exhausting," "draining," and harmful to their well-being because it limits their ability

to prioritize their physical, mental, and social needs. They encourage those who are allies of Black women, femmes, and girls to actively oppose harmful practices and aid in dismantling detrimental frameworks.



## Key Finding:

Black women, femmes, and girls are considered equal partners in effective organizations.

Organizational interviews were conducted to identify methods for successfully serving Black women, femmes, and girls. Organizational representatives identified BWFGs as the primary group accessing their services and described various techniques for implementing successful programs. The insight provided revealed strategies for reimagining how to be an intentional ally of BWFGs. Organizational representatives indicated hiring knowledgeable staff whose intentions were not to be “saviors” but “supporters” of BWFGs was crucial.

“We definitely need more Black women and girls driving the types of programs and services that are offered for Black women and girls. I think that kind of lends to, first of all, relatability, of course, and that it’s not just someone coming and saying, ‘Hey, we have this program for you. Hey, we think you should do this,’ but really allowing them to have the ownership of developing what programs and services they want to see, what do they feel like they need?”

- Organizational Representative

They stressed organizations could demonstrate their commitment to Black women and femmes through promoting employment opportunities at all levels of employment. Even more critical was creating opportunities for Black women, femmes, and girls to design, lead, and evaluate services developed to meet their needs. For instance, an organizational representative demonstrated their commitment to supporting BWFGs in all roles when saying,

Engaging BWFGs in partnerships helps restore trust in systems that have previously caused harm. It also reflects an appreciation for BWFGs’ knowledge, expertise, and skills.

Another strategy for effectively serving BWFGs centered on strengthening interagency collaboration. Organizational representatives reported consumers received better services when agen-

cies working with similar populations coordinated their efforts. They suggested ongoing cooperation could reduce service duplication and, in doing so, make resources available for new initiatives. Overall, BWFGs benefit when organizations collaborate and pool their resources to efficiently provide services.





## Key Finding:

Black women, femmes, and girls belong to a sisterhood that transecends time and space.

Black women, femmes, and girls thrive when surrounded by community and connectedness. They find value in relationships with others and flourish when able to rely on one another for replenishment. Membership in this sisterhood provides them with a sense of connectedness, comfort, and interdependency. BWFGs actively search for

social support systems and are frustrated when they cannot identify spaces where they can gain a sense of community. They are left unfulfilled, isolated, and unsupported when prohibited from connecting with one another as captured by one participant's explanation.

"I sometimes just really feel isolated. I'm very proud to be a Black woman. I was raised that way and that's the way I live my life, but it's pretty challenging at times to be Black in Omaha, Nebraska."

- A Sista Seeking Support

Interviewees stated they appreciate the ability to strengthen intergenerational relationships and opportunities to reaffirm one another across the lifespan. Adult participants expressed a commitment to uplifting young Black girls by providing

comfort and validation while offering suggestions on building resilience and developing the skills needed to navigate the world as a Black woman or femme. One participant suggested,

"[Our girls need to] see more Black women loving and lifting up each other unapologetically, loving themselves, and then we might teach our girls how to do the same."

- A Black Woman

Black women and femmes are ambitious and excel in their careers when supplied with mentorship and room for advancement. They are acutely aware of the detrimental consequences associated with the inability to build professional connections, which leads them to pursue mentorship from both BWFGs and non-BWFGs alike. Participants revealed mentors who hold shared

identities help them learn to navigate professional environments, particularly when encountering discrimination. Interviewees also expressed appreciation for mentors with differing identities who help potentially provide access to spaces historically inaccessible for BWFGs.<sup>6</sup> A woman illustrated the benefits of mentorship when stating,

"I've been very fortunate and very successful with understanding the importance of networking within the race, outside of the race. Really having those mentors that have helped me continue to grow. And just really having, beyond mentorship, true die-hard sponsors, meaning people that are going to go toe-to-toe, bat-for-bat for me to say, 'You'll be a fool if you don't get [Respondent] on your team, or get her on this committee.' People that are deemed to have that esteemed level of respect in the field. They are saying, 'I'll put my name and my own reputation on the line for this Black woman to get that opportunity and that chance.'"

- A Successful Black Woman

Black women, femmes, and girls aim to elevate their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces through leadership and action. Group members described how, through sisterhood, they uplift one another, which cascades into uplifting others through advocacy and civic engagement. Participants highlighted their commitments to "giving back" by intentionally using leadership positions to help underrepresented groups advance and working to establish environments that are nurturing to all people. At times, they

encounter resistance while doing so, which can be burdensome and lead local Black women to relocate to cities where they feel their efforts are recognized and appreciated. Some women also expressed they capitalize on opportunities to assume political roles and support ongoing efforts to increase Black women and femmes' inclusion in politics. BWFGs are a driving force within political arenas and work to transform their environments through legislation both locally and nationally.<sup>7</sup>

## Key Finding:

Black trans women actively navigate varied expectations surrounding their womanhood.

A group of Omaha based Black trans women provided insight on balancing expectations within and outside of the trans community. Participants discussed fiercely moving through life encountering experiences influenced by living outside of the gender binary. While living as their authentic selves, they confront pressure to represent stereotypical feminine beauty standards that

are perpetuated by media portrayals of trans women. Yet, if they do, may become disconnected from the trans community that provides forms of validation they cannot access in other spaces. Participants also spoke to the privileges and disadvantages of the ability to “pass” as a ciswoman. One woman, in weighing the consequences of gender confirmation surgery, wondered,

“So that’s a question of, do I do too much to where I build a separation between myself and my community and not even mean to do it? So then you could possibly be in a position where the people that you connect to the most may not really want to be close to you, or there can be barriers. And then like, overall society really positions you to be in this never-ending battle to achieve...”

- A Conscious Black Trans Woman

Another woman defended her right to freely express herself however she saw fit when saying,

“It’s always feeling like your reality, no matter how you wake up in the morning – is this kind of illusion you have to maintain for everyone outside of yourself. Including cisgender Black women.”

- A Self-Assured Trans Woman

Black trans women bravely face discrimination that carries the risk of harm on multiple fronts while living their lives. They speak out against transphobia and the murder of trans women. Stories shared by local participants mirrored the experiences of Black trans women around the country.<sup>8</sup> Breaking a person’s perception of their

gender, being exposed by men and ciswomen, and being deceived by trusted individuals were all pinpointed as threats to participants’ safety. An interviewee shared the considerations they take into account when deciding to begin a relationship as,

“In the back of your mind, you have to feel like, ‘Oh, is this person even comfortable with being around me and other people, too?’ And like some people, you know, some people are like, ‘Oh, you know, I don’t care.’ But it’s like, do you really not care? And do I want to find myself in a position to see if you really care or not?”

- A Conscious Black Trans Woman

Black trans women protect themselves from harm by refusing to accept their lives matter less. They know they deserve safety and security and expect

anyone who advocates for Black lives to understand that includes Black trans lives too.



## Key Finding:

Black girls are liberated.

Black girls refuse to be defined by outdated, inaccurate views of womanhood centered on respectability politics.<sup>9</sup> Young participants insisted their worth could not be measured by their self-expression. They recognize they deserve respect because they are living beings and will not accept others' judgment of their character as reality. Black girls push family members, partic-

ularly those from older generations, to expand their perceptions of womanhood and to honor their inherent dignity. Black girls boldly aspire to empower themselves by taking control of their reproductive health and sexual well-being.<sup>10</sup> They value developing leadership skills, pursuing higher education, and expanding career opportunities. One youth participant suggested,

"I feel like there's like a lack of advocacy for sending Black women, or for Black women going to get their degrees, or for education. Like I don't feel like super encouraged in Nebraska or in Omaha, at least in our community... Once you graduate [high school], you go home, you take care of your kids or have kids... I think advocacy for a higher education is another thing we need to improve on."

- A Black Girl Who Dreams

Participants viewed each of these as methods they could use to create change and elevate their existence. They are determined to forge

new pathways within their communities for future Black women, femmes, and girls to follow.





# Conclusion

As Black women, femmes, and girls we are the experts of our lives. While *The Essence of Us: Part I* provided important background information on Omaha's Black women and girls, the current report provides priceless insight into our experiences living in a world undesigned for us. We encourage others to listen and hear our voices as we give context to the numbers and offer a more nuanced understanding of being a Black woman, femme, or girl in Omaha.

Data collected from the American Community Survey (ACS) and presented in our first report indicated Omaha is home to a relatively young group of Black women and girls. Yet, they do not remain in the city through adulthood. *The Essence of Us: Part II* has presented first-hand narratives in which Black youth let us know what they expect. Black women and femmes have revealed possible solutions that can be implemented to create environments in which we are celebrated and have the space to reach our upper limits.

Moving forward we urge partners, advocates, and accomplices to continue to support us as we spearhead initiatives aimed at our success. Let participants' narratives serve as inspiration to address the areas of change that remain. Commit to our advancement, holistic well-being, and valuing our presence. Only then can we grace the world with the entire essence of us.

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# Appendix A

Social media was used to connect with participants who were interested in supporting the project. Participants also encouraged women in their circles to participate. Additionally, IBBG and UNO STEPs relied on established networks to ensure the narratives of Black girls, trans women, and older adults were represented. Black women professionals who held leadership roles were invited to participate in individual interviews focused on understanding their experiences rising through the ranks in their respective careers. Lastly, representatives from programs that primarily serve Black women, femmes, and girls provided input regarding their experiences engaging consumers and securing funding. All project participants identified as Black women, femmes, or girls.





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