

Girl House and Beyond

**A Facilitator's Guide for
Empowering Young Women**



By Kesa Kivel

Girl House and Beyond

A Facilitator's Guide for Empowering Young Women

*For Those Teaching the Following Topics
from Grade Six Through College Levels:*

Sexual Harassment

Feminism, Sexism

Girls' Empowerment and Activism

Art (Including Protest and Installation Art)

Judy Chicago-Inspired Art Projects



Created and Written by Kesa Kivel

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To the **Divine One, Uni-Verse, and Ultimate Artist--**I marvel at the patterns, colors, music, emotions, challenges, people, animals, and engineering feats that create and are YOU. I am grateful and in awe.

Note: Despite the abundant assistance on this project, I claim all of the blind spots, minefields, and typos. I am solely responsible for the contents herein.

Dear Colleague,

The purpose of the *Girl House and Beyond* curriculum is to help you create a safe environment for students to view the *Girl House Art Project* film and explore the topic of sexual harassment through ten engaging activities. Even if you don't have access to the film, you can still do nine of the activities. All of them use the lens of sexual harassment to explore a wide range of issues that are of concern to girls and women.

It is my hope that through this curriculum, students who have been sexually harassed can begin the healing process, and that all students will learn some critical thinking skills and gain an understanding of the social/cultural factors that affect girls' and women's lives. The guide was designed with these things in mind.

The *Girl House and Beyond* curriculum is based on my work with the girls and women I have taught and the issues with which I'm familiar. Feel free to add to or modify the curriculum as needed to make it more useful for a particular group of students. Both female and male students will benefit from viewing the film and using the discussion topics for it. The activities, however, were designed especially for girls and women.

To start, read the "Facilitator's Overview," then begin the workshop with Activity #1, "What Is Sexual Harassment?" followed by Activity #2, "Sexual Harassment Intersections." In subsequent sessions, your choice of activities will depend on your students' interests and needs. There is no particular order to follow. The curriculum can be used with a wide range of ages and in many different settings, such as art classes, women's studies classes, and after-school programs for adolescent girls.

If you have feedback about your experiences in using the film and/or the guide, please contact me at www.kesakivel.com or use the curriculum evaluation form at the back of the guide. Future editions will be enhanced by your responses. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Kesa Kivel

Section One: About the Project

“(The Girl House Art Project)...made me feel like a better citizen. I’m saying this because I can take more responsibility in helping others around me and in my community.”

-Girl House girl Amanda, from her follow-up feedback form one year later

The Purpose of the Guide

For too long, too many girls have molded themselves to fit cultural standards that do not serve them, their authentic selves lying dormant under “pretty” masks. The girls are under a spell, and we as a society have cast it. The purpose of *Girl House and Beyond: A Facilitator’s Guide for Empowering Young Women* is to help you assist girls in breaking that spell and realizing their full potentials through self-reflection, critical thinking, and engaging activities. More girls should be “full of themselves” – proud, confident, spirited and strong.

In using this guide, you will be providing a framework to help girls identify and study sexual harassment and other gender-related issues. Within this framework, girls will learn that gender injustice is not caused by any personal failure on their part, and they will gain an understanding of how personal and social/cultural factors intertwine. You will be helping the girls to know themselves better so they can speak with their true voices and live authentic lives. You will be helping them to challenge the status quo, one step at a time.

Challenging the norm is a difficult task, requiring courage from the girls and support from you. At a time in their lives when they are still very much under the authority of others, the girls will be asked to rethink their home and school environments and to question gender roles in society. In meeting this challenge, the girls will feel the power of standing up for themselves, working collectively, and making a difference in the community.

To make the process as enjoyable and engaging as possible, the curriculum uses art, discussion, film, and interactive exercises as teaching tools. The use of art, in particular, offers unique access points to the core teachings for those students who learn best through visual imagery. You can further boost the chances for the girls’ active and sustained participation by teaching in a loving, respectful manner.

This guide is also there for you as a person, not just as a facilitator -- let this be *your* journey of discovery, too. On your own time, take the opportunity to examine gender injustices that may come to mind as you use the guide -- for example, situations you may have faced in the past but have not yet processed. I have learned so much as I’ve looked not just for the practical solutions to problems that have arisen, but also for gifts that lead to personal growth. As we lend a helping hand, we can get a hand up as well, if we let ourselves be vulnerable.

The problems of sexual harassment and gender inequity are, of course, too large to be solved through any one project or guide. Because of the ongoing barrage of objectifying media images, the gender bias in schools, and unjust laws and policies, we must be ever vigilant. Individual consciousness-raising and ongoing dialogues are needed, as well as collaborative actions on many fronts. We must offer abundant resources so that girls can sustain the positive changes they make in projects like this one, becoming the strong women they deserve to be and that our society needs.



*Adult Focus Group Participants for Girl House
(see Closing Circle Exercise, p. 13)*

Introduction to the Girl House Art Project

In the spring of 2005, I passed by the small wooden house on the grounds of the YWCA Santa Monica/Westside, which I had seen many times before. This time was different. I don't know why, but I started to wonder what adolescent girls would create if they had an opportunity to do an art installation inside the house, based on the 1972 "Womanhouse" art installation organized and team-taught by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (see "Womanhouse," p. 47). "Girl House/Womanhouse." Hmm. I had never viewed "Womanhouse" in person, but I had heard about it and had seen pictures. How would girls artistically describe the limitations of the female experience in 2006, thirty-four years after women had artistically described the limitations in 1972?

I had already been teaching my feminist arts curriculum at the YWCA's after-school programs and summer camp, but this would be different. Would I be able to develop enough new curriculum for the ten-month project I envisioned? How should I go about raising funds and doing outreach? I knew there would be a lot of work, but I was highly motivated. As a survivor of childhood sexual molestation and of abusive relationships as an adult, I have dedicated myself to helping create a world in which girls and women are respected, informed, and empowered, and which is violence-free for everyone.

The planning stage began. I convinced myself that I could create enough new curriculum and raise sufficient funds. To help with other aspects of the project, I decided to conduct a focus group of community activists to get their perspectives on girls' issues and their input on the best ways to do outreach for the project. With the YWCA's support, a diverse group of fifteen women met a few months before Girl House started. During the focus group, the women offered suggestions on topics to teach, people to contact, guest speakers to invite, and places to put flyers. The "seed" energy they provided encouraged and nourished me and, I believe, helped sustain the ten-month project. I felt that having a large, supportive group of women in the focus group was a good sign, getting things off to a strong start.

I was, then, initially disappointed when only four girls, all of them white, were able to commit to the entire Girl House project. This was one of my biggest personal challenges, because I had fervently hoped for a larger and more diverse group of participants, such as those I had worked with in the past. My heart's desire is that as many people as possible learn about feminism, particularly how gender issues affect their own lives and how these issues can be addressed collectively. Education can lead to change. Ultimately, I had to surrender to the fact that in this case, it was these particular creative, smart, spirited girls who were choosing to take this journey with my assistant, Betty Marín, and me. From start to finish, the project was an adventure of surrendering and learning from these four bright, wonderful girls.

I was happy that some of the girls' words and actions from the last month of the project were captured in a 16-minute documentary directed by Brooke Randolph, a University of Southern California graduate student in film. The Girl House girls were proud to be in the film, and the fact that it was being made underscored for them that their concerns were widespread and not the results of personal failure. It reinforced the idea that *they* were the experts on their experiences with sexual harassment; no adult or set of statistics could adequately describe their pain or discomfort. The film showed them that their efforts were pioneering and could be inspiring to others.

All in all, I believe the Girl House Art Project and film were worthwhile for many reasons. From the participating girls' feedback forms, I saw that they "got it" and would never be the same. In addition, more than seventy people attended the public reception and learned about sexual harassment and gender-related issues from the girls' points of view. The National Women's Studies Association selected the *Girl House Art Project* film to be screened at its 2007 conference in Chicago, and the film is being used in universities and community centers nationwide. Even though the project had fewer participants than I had wanted, its impact turned out to be far greater than I had expected.

Girl House Art Project Summary

I created the Girl House Art Project as a broad-based feminist curriculum in an interactive format for a small group of middle-school girls as part of the YWCA Santa Monica/Westside's community service programming. Four girls met weekly after school with my assistant, Betty Marín, and me. The project's duration was ten months.

The Girl House Art Project was divided into three sets of sessions. Each session started with an opening circle, which provided an opportunity for the girls to share personal experiences and bond with one another. It ended with a closing circle, giving the girls a sense of completion and helping them to transition to more self-directed activities once the session was over (see "Opening and Closing Circles," p. 13).

The first set of sessions dealt with building self-esteem and forging the group's identity. Topics included mindful eating, body image, and conflict-resolution skills. The second set of sessions dealt with feminist/political issues. Topics included women's history, the wage gap between women and men, and media literacy.



The third set of sessions was devoted to art, activism, and creating the installation and public exhibition. Topics included the art of perception, the purpose of art, and feminist artists. (Art was used in almost every session during the entire project. See "Using Art," p. 14.)

Guest speakers taught workshops on a variety of subjects, including self-defense, the Salem Witch Trials, and financial literacy. A YWCA staff member spoke on her immigrant journey from El Salvador many years ago, ending up as an ESL (English as a Second Language) student at the same middle school that the Girl House girls attended. My assistant, Betty Marín, who is Latina, offered a distinct and valuable cultural perspective.

The girls were given numerous opportunities to offer feedback, which developed their critical thinking skills and improved the project (see "Ideas for Student Feedback Forms," p. 43).

During the third set of sessions, the girls created an art installation, inspired by the 1972 "Womanhouse" art installation (see "Womanhouse," p. 47). To find the theme for their art installation, the girls wrote and talked about what issues were important to them; sexual harassment emerged as the most distressing common problem.

Inside the small wooden house on the YWCA property, the girls created a bedroom of a girl who is being sexually harassed, artistically expressing her worries, fears, and the potential consequences of this kind of behavior. The Girl House Public Exhibition was held in June 2006, showcasing their artwork. The girls were the expert educator-docents for the day.



The Girl House Girls (l to r): Amanda, age 13; Angelica, age 13; Kaitlyn, age 13; and Lily, age 12, sitting in front of their digital images on a mural they created as part of the Girl House Art Project.