

II. The Fight for \$15 & Fairness: Exploring Youth Leadership for Economic Justice

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Abstract

This chapter is about the social change efforts of youth—how they respond to the complex economic, social, and political conditions that shape their lives. Drawing on Paulo Freire’s (1996) notion of “praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 33), we explore how youth take responsibility for “repairing the world (*Tikkun Olam*), through acts that promote social justice” (Berlinger, 2003, p. 30). Findings highlight intersectional struggles for economic justice—namely the Fight for \$15 and Fairness movement. Foregrounding the importance of a *distributive orientation to leadership*, “(that is, leadership among many people) and of shared values and purpose” (Schmitz, 2012, p. 76), we illustrate how the social justice praxis of the Tikkun Youth Project and \$15 & Fairness effectively center youth leadership. In so doing, the chapter contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of youth leadership—not as a product, but as a process—rich in transformative possibilities.

Keywords: Youth Leadership, *Tikkun Olam*, Intersectional Economic Justice, \$15 & Fairness

This chapter draws on our work with the Tikkun Youth Project, which aimed to increase the capacity of youth to “repair the world” by promoting social justice and collective responsibility for addressing injustice (Rosenthal, 2005; Sacks, 2005). Focusing on youth-led social change efforts in Windsor, Ontario, we begin with a brief discussion of the Tikkun Youth Project’s use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) to center youth’s social justice

leadership—an approach that views leadership not as a position or product, but, “a process in which one takes responsibility to engage” (Schmitz, 2012, p. xvi). Next, we address the action project selected by youth, specifically the Fight for \$15 & Fairness campaign, emphasizing youth’s appreciation of economic struggles being caused by the influence of multiple, combined forces (i.e. class, race, gender, (dis)ability, etc.) contributing to social inequality, thereby demonstrating their sophisticated understanding of intersectional struggles for economic justice. Lastly, we consider the importance of situated knowledge—that is, knowledge derived from lived experience of oppression and privilege (Haraway, 1991)—as a critical force in informing youth’s social change efforts. Our discussion foregrounds the importance of a distributive orientation to leadership to the facilitation of youth-leadership capacity.

The Tikkun Youth Project: Facilitating Youth-Led Social Justice Leadership as Praxis

“Young people want to be engaged as change-makers in their lives, their families and their communities. They are disproportionately involved in and affected by the problems that beset their communities – and they must be part of the solution.” (The Forum for Youth Investment cited by Edelman, Gill, Comerford, Larson, & Hare, 2004)

The Tikkun Youth Project sought the experiences and perspectives of young people between the ages of 16-25 at each of our five international partnership sites in Canada, South Africa, and Kosovo. Aiming to document youth-led efforts for social change, our university and community partners recruited and trained five youth researchers (YRs) with a demonstrated record of social justice leadership. Youth at the Windsor, ON partnership site were long-term residents of the city, were predominately female, and second-generation immigrants. Windsor YRs exhibited leadership in a range of social issues relating to gender equality and various anti-poverty initiatives (i.e. food banks, affordable housing, and accessible post-secondary education). Addressing social oppression and economic (in)equality, the YRs participated in the following: developing community gardens/markets to

provide healthy and fresh produce to the community; working with students in after-school programs in areas of high need; advocating for women's rights, workers' rights, and ethnic minority rights; and working with immigrants to help with their settlement and integration.

Supported by project mentors, the YRs, "undertook roughly twelve hours of comprehensive training in qualitative research, particularly in interview techniques, research ethics, and transcription" (Baczewska, Cachon, Daniel, & Selimos, 2018, p. 294). YRs then engaged in collaborative development of the interview guide and conducted semi-structured interviews with three to four of their social change-oriented peers (recruited through YRs' well-established advocacy networks). These interviews aimed to capture how youth become aware of injustices and take leadership roles and responsibility for addressing social injustice. The interviews also explored how their everyday lived experiences shaped their commitment to youth-led advocacy for positive social change. Findings discussed in this chapter are derived from twenty-five transcribed and coded interviews, post-interview notes written by YRs, focus groups/a "back-talk" focus group session¹ with YRs, and one-on-one conversations with YRs throughout the research process.

Importantly, the Tikkun Youth Project meaningfully centered youth leadership throughout *the entire project*. Youth perspectives were consciously foregrounded—they were equal partners in a continuously refined research process. Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1996) notion of, "praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 33), the Tikkun Youth Project positioned youth as experts in their own lives, with the capacity to work with others to take responsibility for "repairing the world (*Tikkun Olam*)" through acts that promote social justice (Berlinger, 2003). For example, YRs were integral to the development and facilitation of the Tikkun Youth Project's Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach in which youth were both research participants and researchers focusing on engagement, collaboration, and a commitment to social justice (Brydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke, & Sabhlok, 2011).

Complementing the primary objectives of social justice praxis—reflection and action—PAR directly empowers members of the community through reflexive consciousness-raising (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Cultivating an environment that supports collective inquiry (reflection) and practice (action) for the purpose of social change, collaboration with youth was fundamental to the Tikkun Youth Project which sought to build youth-

leadership capacity. In fact, the Tikkun Youth Project exemplifies social justice youth-leadership, “as praxis in the Freireian sense, involving both reflection and action” (Furman, 2012, p. 202), given that PAR, “facilitates transformation at the individual, relational, and community levels for people experiencing oppression” (Fayter, 2016, p. 70).

The Tikkun Youth Project’s distributive orientation to leadership, “refram[es] the idea of leadership, moving from an emphasis on the noun *leader* to an emphasis on the verb *to lead*” (Schmitz, 2012, p. xv). Thus, facilitating youth leadership is about creating opportunities whereby youth are supported in taking personal and social responsibility to create social change (Schmitz, 2012).

Youth Leadership and The Fight for \$15 and Fairness

Utilizing PAR, the Tikkun Youth Project positioned youth leadership as central when addressing the needs of the community. In Windsor, the Tikkun YRs chose to join the Fight for \$15 and Fairness because the campaign deeply resonated and best addressed the intersectional economic issues captured in interviews conducted with their social change-oriented peers. For example, Windsor youth consistently referenced struggles to find meaningful employment; exploitive and unfair labour conditions; debilitating student debt; and a lack of access to affordable transportation and housing—issues that were intensified by intersecting social identity categories (i.e. gender, sexual orientation, immigration status). Youth consistently voiced experiences of social and economic exclusion, stating that they often felt “left out in the cold.” Not surprisingly, Windsor social change-oriented youth were involved in initiatives aimed at addressing the interrelated topics of poverty and oppression. It is in this context that Windsor YRs determined that the Fight for \$15 and Fairness would be an applicable central action initiative for year two of the Tikkun Youth Project.

Importantly, the Tikkun Youth Project and the Fight for \$15 and Fairness share a distributive orientation to leadership. That is, “leadership among many people, and of shared values and purpose” (Schmitz, 2012, p. 76). In fact, youth participation has been integral to the growth of the \$15 & Fairness

movement. For example, youth have been highly engaged in cross-campus coalitions of unionized and nonunionized workers, community and student groups, public demonstrations, social media campaigns, and community outreach (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Fight for \$15 and Fairness transit canvas in Toronto, ON. By David Bush, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10156592959559928&set=pcb.10156592959644928&type=3&theater>

Community-organizing tactics are central to the success of the Fight for \$15 and Fairness, a grassroots workers' campaign that emerged from organizing for fast food workers in the United States in 2012. Since that time, the Fight for \$15 has spread to more than 300 US cities and inspired a global movement (Frache, 2016). In Ontario:

the Fight for \$15 & Fairness grew out of [a] successful Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage, a labour-community alliance that launched a \$14 minimum wage campaign... the Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage opened up an important public conversation about the nature of work, especially for non-union workers who comprise over 70 percent of the workforce in Ontario. (Frache, 2016, para. 2-3)

Notably, “low-wage, non-unionized workers organized by the Workers’ Action Centre [WAC] in Toronto—the vast majority of whom were women and workers of color—were at the crux of this movement” (Bush & Nesbitt, 2017, para. 19). The Fight for \$15 and Fairness won \$15 minimum wage² and

other significant concessions (i.e. paid sick days, an adequate number of paid hours, fair scheduling with advanced notice, stronger labour regulations and protections, and measures that make it easier to join or maintain a union). The success of the Ontario Fight for \$15 & Fairness campaign is founded on a bottom-up organizing model. Significantly, the Fight for \$15 and Fairness campaign:

[is] not an insular or top-down campaign, but one predicated on building grassroots leadership across sectors.... The movement culture they cultivated cares about the people involved in it, aims to build people up, and gives workers the chance to shape the movement in a way that reflects their own experiences and communities. (Bush & Nesbitt, 2017, para 63-4)

The “bottom-up framework” of the Fight for \$15 and Fairness campaign built workers’ capacity and confidence and, “gave participants a powerful experience of collective political and economic education” (Bush & Nesbitt, 2017, para 37).

The Fight for \$15 and Fairness consciously creates and holds space for workers to break their isolation, connect, and collectively build their capacity for leadership (Ladd as cited in Carniol, 2010). Deena Ladd, coordinator of Toronto’s WAC, and social policy advocate, Trish Hennessy, see worker empowerment as resulting from the worker-centered approach:

Something important happens: A group of people who have never met each other begin talking about the realities facing them on the job and what’s happening in their lives; they start agreeing that what’s happening isn’t right and that they have a role in doing something about it ... Together: Everything we do follows this basic principle: *Nothing about us without us* [emphasis added]. (Ladd & Hennessy, 2009, para. 21)

PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING Developed by Sheila Wilmot & Deena Ladd
Community organizing is a model grounded in a vision for social change work that:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carries out work from an anti-oppression perspective.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees people as the experts in determining their own lives.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values having people affected by an issue as being the ones figuring out how to change or transform their situation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strives for on-going, active relationship building with the community of people affected by an issue.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works to get people involved in not only carrying out activities but in making on-going decisions on plans, strategies and tactics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds collective power to disrupt dominant power.

Figure 2. \$15 and Fairness table of *Principles for Community Organizing* created from Handout – Workshop for Community Organizing. Toronto, ON.

Social justice leadership as praxis is at the core of WAC’s community organizing culture (see Figure 2) -- “a culture of intellectual inquiry and organizing ... that foster[s] new layers of worker leadership” (Bush & Nesbitt, 2017, para. 37). This distributive orientation to leadership ensures that, “[n]ew voices [rise] up from the rank and file³ [to reflect their collaborative work, as they begin to lead] trainings, workshops, and panel discussions, as well as speaking at public events and in the media” (Bush & Nesbitt, 2017, para 37-8). In sum, youth leadership emerges when youth are valued as necessary stakeholders in social change efforts.

An Intersectional Orientation to Economic Justice

Having contextualized the Fight for \$15 and Fairness, we now turn to a discussion of the intersectional dynamic of struggles for economic justice. As previously discussed, the Tikkun Youth Project utilized PAR in order to illustrate how young people's standpoints based on social identity categories intersect to contribute to different and unique experiences of oppression and privilege (Collins, 1990; Smith, 1987). "Intersectionality," as an analytical framework, maps social inequalities that arise from a combination of interwoven forms of oppression, which in combination produce distinct experiences of discrimination. We now understand that all forms of discrimination are not separate and distinct, but interact in complex ways (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).

We draw upon DeJong and Love's (2016) definition of youth oppression as, "the systematic subordination and mistreatment of young people based on age through the restriction and denial of opportunities to exercise social, economic, and political power" (p. 342). This understanding of oppression allows us to recognize how people can experience distinct and dynamic forms of oppression (i.e. racism, ableism, sexism which in turn can interact with class and economic oppression). This echoes Edwards (2014) and Fraser (2007) who argue that social movements mobilizing for the purpose of labour and economic rights not only pursue economic interests, but also make cultural and social claims as they interact with the overarching effects of capitalism.

Consciously framing the campaign for \$15 and Fairness around intersecting forms of inequalities, the movement speaks to multiple forms of simultaneously active forces of oppression as experienced in the everyday lives of its members (see Figure 3 & 4). The importance of an intersectional lens is passionately expressed by Gilyary Masa, Community Organizer, Fight for \$15 and Fairness:

I can't iterate enough how grateful I am for this movement, for not only talking about minimum wage as just a workers' piece, but for really integrating the conversation around race, class, gender, and islamophobia and all the things that are attacking us all.

(Fight for \$15 & Fairness, 2017)

15andfairness.org

**WE WILL NOT
TOLERATE
ISLAMOPHOBIA
ANYWHERE**

**FIGHT
FOR
AND \$15
FAIRNESS**

Figure 3. Campaign placard. Reproduced from <https://www.15andfairness.org/resources>

15andfairness.org

NO
ECONOMIC EQUALITY
WITHOUT
RACIAL EQUALITY

FIGHT
FOR
AND \$15
FAIRNESS

15andfairness.org

**FAIRNESS
MEANS
JOB SECURITY**

**FIGHT
FOR
AND \$15
FAIRNESS**

Figure 4. Campaign placard. Reproduced from <https://www.15andfairness.org/resources>

Masa's words speak to the campaign's ability to capture intersecting forms of oppression. Her statement expresses the multi-dimensionality of the struggle for economic justice, whereby the experience of oppression is never identical.

In this sense, the Fight for \$15 and Fairness is not only about securing a \$15 minimum wage and improved labour standards, but also about articulating

and turning attention to the ways in which ageism, racism, sexism, and multi-forms of oppression are linked to economic inequality. In fact, based on 2013 statistics, of the 8.9% of minimum wage earners in Ontario, youth aged 15-19 account for 50.2% of minimum wage workforce (Maclean's, 2017).

Moreover:

[a]n Ontario student graduating from a four-year university program, for example, shouldered an average of \$22,207 in provincial debt in 2012-2013. That makes for a total debt load of more than \$34,000 if they also borrowed the average sum from the federal government. (National Post, 2016, para. 8)

Furthermore, “[a]n important dimension of precarious work is the over-representation of racialized workers and recent immigrants” (Block, 2015, p. 8). Thus, collective efforts to raise the minimum wage speak to a deeper appreciation of the underlying social and political realities that shape youth's lives.

Debunking the Myth of Political Apathy Among Youth

Tikkun youth expressed demands that expose systemic forms of oppression and inequality. Doing so can be particularly hard for young people given that the stereotype of youth as disengaged and apathetic still holds much resonance. In reality, many young people are, “largely excluded from formal political processes and continue to be subject to age-based systems of authority” (Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2016, p. 2). Not surprisingly, youth connect with the Fight for \$15 and Fairness' critique of the unequal distribution of wealth and privilege. Struggling with precarious work, student debt, and un/underemployment, youth are well-versed in the socio-economic risks that affect their lives.

Windsor YRs repeatedly expressed that they were being ignored or that adults do not take their voices, concerns, and input seriously. Many expressed that if and when politicians pay attention to them and the issues that they care about, they are simply pandering, or their concerns receive a fleeting and condescending acknowledgement. Consistent with literature documenting the state of youth engagement (Balsano, 2005; D'Agostino &

Visser, 2010; Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010), Windsor youth noted a lack of opportunity and support for their political participation—and when and if it does occur, it is often disregarded or managed. For example, interviewed youth and Windsor YRs shared being told, “those are nice, idealistic ideas,” or “you’re young, your idealism will fade as you mature and get a better or *more realistic* grasp of reality when you are an adult.” Windsor YRs expressed feeling capable and competent, yet adults consistently ignored them or were paternalistic.

Recent scholarship has shown that youth are not politically disengaged (see Figure 5), but politically active beyond formal electoral politics (Baczewska et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2010). For example, research suggests the changing nature of youth political engagement (Andersson, 2015; Benedicto, 2013; Coletto, 2016; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015), whereby Millennials are more likely to volunteer in community organizations and services, are overwhelmingly more engaged in online political activities (Schmitz, 2012; Samara’s Democracy 360, 2015), and are, “more open to diversity, and prefer to work in teams” (Winograd & Hais, 2008, p. 2).

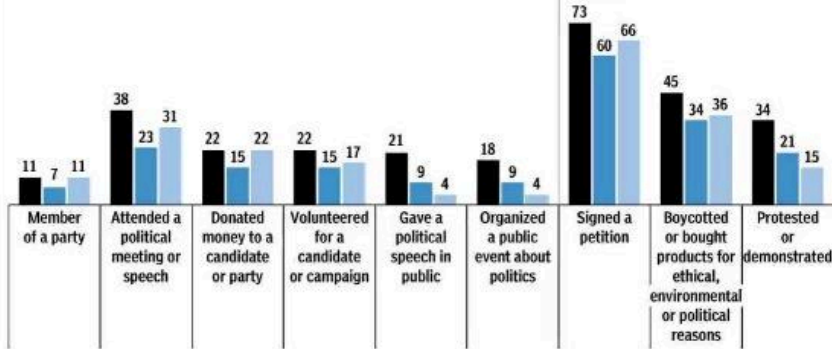
DEBUNKING THE MYTH

*Being engaged in politics is more than just casting a ballot.
Samara Canada surveyed over 2,400 Canadians and found that when you
look beyond votes cast, millennials are even more engaged than older generations.*

POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RATES IN CANADA, BY AGE

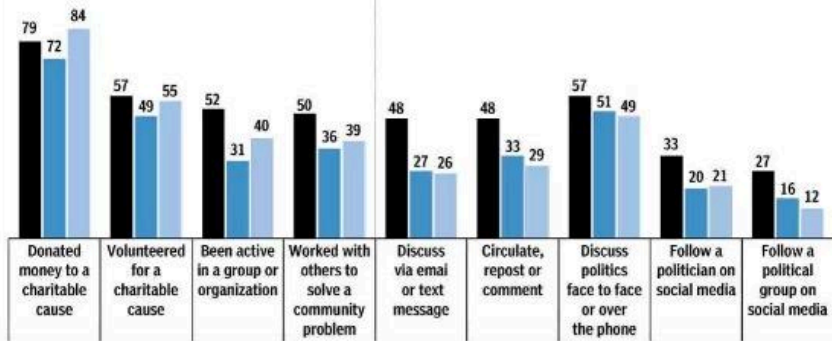
■ 18-29 ■ 30-55 ■ 56+

RATES OF FORMAL ENGAGEMENT



RATES OF ACTIVISM

RATES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



RATES OF DISCUSSION

SOURCE: SAMARA CANADA

JONATHON RIVAIT / NATIONAL POST

Figure 5. Political and civic engagement rates in Canada. By Jonathon Rivait, National Post. Reproduced from http://wpmedia.nationalpost.com/2015/09/na0910_politicalmillennials_c_jr.jpeg?quality=60&strip=al

Building Solidarity by Accessing Situated Knowledge

True to both the principles of PAR and an intersectional framework—foregrounding the ways in which social inequality is shaped by diverse forms of oppression, and using lived experience as a tool for advancing social change (Collins & Bilge, 2016)—Haraway’s (1991) theory of

“situated knowledges” calls for shared accounts of the world based on, “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connection called solidarity” (p. 191). The struggle for economic justice as illuminated by the Fight for \$15 and Fairness demonstrates the importance of networks and connections in solidifying a common ground based on difference. Momentum is however sustained through the recognition of multiple, yet shared forms of injustice as highlighted in the following account of the campaign:

The \$15 and Fairness movement is intersectional, reaching out to racialized workers, contract faculty members in universities and colleges, and students working part-time, among other groups. By focusing on the broad theme of fairness for *all* workers, the campaign has been able to build common ground across a wide range of people, organizations and workplaces. (Brown, 2017, para. 4)

In so doing, the campaign relied on subjugated standpoints (Haraway, 1991) from which to form a base movement. Situating economic injustice in real, concrete, lived experiences makes the effects of economic struggle visible and discernable (Taylor, 2018). Doing so, “promised more adequate, sustained, objective, and transformative accounts” (Haraway, 1991, p. 191) of oppression and injustice. The campaign positioned as a broader social movement was mobilized by listening to the situated voices of workers recounting their struggles for decent work and fairness. Echoing the common intersectional barriers that bear on their everyday lives, all members are responsible for leading and shaping the movement by recognizing that systems of oppression are sustained and thrive on our inability to reconcile difference (Taylor, 2018). Critically, an approach that values situated knowledge repositions “difference” from obstacle to source of transformative power and potential.

Moreover, literature highlighting youth’s situated knowledge reveals a more complex understanding of youth political participation whereby, “many young people are disenchanting with political structures that are unresponsive to their needs and interests, but that they remain interested in social and political issues and continue to seek recognition from the political system” (Harris et al., 2010, p. 9). Accordingly, accounts of youth’s situated knowledge are a powerful antidote to dominant perceptions of youth political apathy.

Drawing on lived experience, youth at each site expressed how their focal concerns (i.e. access to clean water, education, and/or healthcare) shaped their social change objectives. Tikkun youth articulated substantial critiques of the ways in which economic vulnerability pervades their lives. Little wonder that youth are at the forefront of many of the world's economic justice movements (Giroux, 2013). Windsor Tikkun youth advanced the \$15 & Fairness campaign by organizing campus outreach tabling events⁴, a Know Your Rights workshop for student workers, an economic justice & social determinants of health campus event, the Wall of Wages: Speak with Us About Economic Justice cross-campus provincial campaign event (see figures 6 & 7), and Youth Initiatives for Economic Justice: \$15 & Fairness (as part of the International Tikkun Youth Symposium event).

In prioritizing youth's situated knowledge, the Tikkun Youth Project created space for social change-oriented youth to reflect on and further their social justice work in causes near and dear to their hearts. Interestingly, Tikkun youth across our five international partnership sites consistently expressed frustration over a lack of opportunities for social and economic advancement. Certainly, the gap between the rich and the poor has grown at an alarming rate over the past few decades (Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2016). Consequently, economic justice is central to youth's international social change efforts. Whether in South Africa, Kosovo, Toronto, Windsor or Thunder Bay, struggles for intersectional economic justice were essential to the social change efforts of *all* youth.

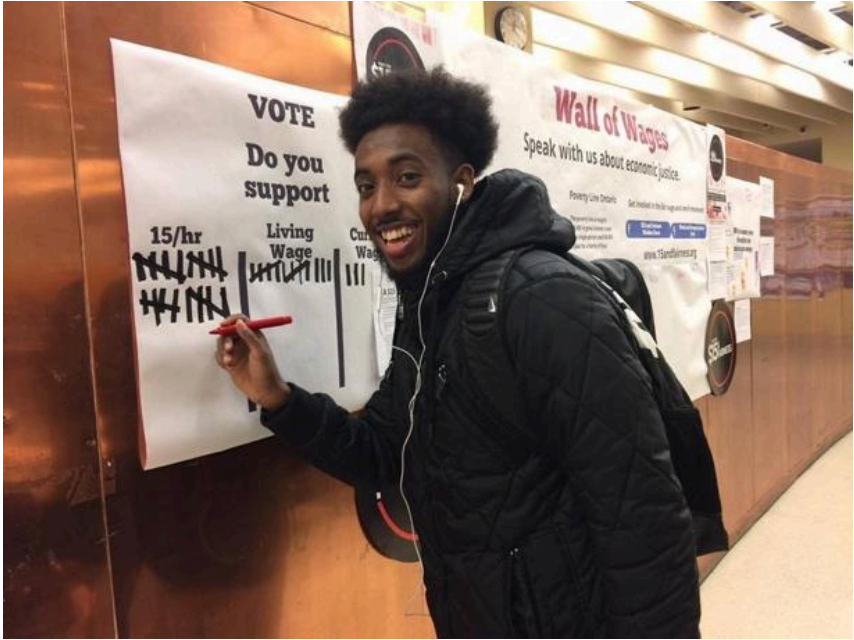


Figure 6. Economic justice, Tikkun youth campus outreach, University of Windsor.



Figure 7. Wall of Wages: Speak with us about economic justice, Tikkun youth campus outreach, University of Windsor

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that youth cultivate their capacity for social change leadership when they are supported and valued as essential stakeholders. The Tikkun Youth Project represents an innovative youth-led action research project that is committed to the idea that youth can and must be integral to our social justice efforts. Given that youth comprise the world's largest demographic group (United Nations, 2013), they hold the potential to effect positive social change if provided opportunities for meaningful participation and self-determined leadership (Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2016). Challenging dominant and intersecting forms of oppression requires meaningfully engaging with youth, making it a necessary first step in cultivating youth-led social change. Unfortunately, youth are typically politically marginalized as evidenced in adult-centric policies and institutional norms and values that fail to account for young people's standpoints. Indeed, "[y]oung people ... are marginalized and excluded by

practices that give middle-aged adults the power to act on and for them, often without their agreement or consent” (DeJong & Love, 2016, p. 342).

In Windsor, Tikkun YR's social justice praxis led them to take up the Fight for \$15 and Fairness. The campaign's focus on intersecting injustices and advancement of economic justice reflected young people's lived experiences of part-time, low-wage, or unpaid employment. Having identified economic marginalization as a unifying focus, youth determined the Fight for \$15 and Fairness as a timely social justice action project. Embracing a distributive orientation to leadership where young people are at the centre of addressing various forms of oppression that impact their lives, youth are actively shaping the direction and scope of the movement for \$15 and Fairness. In so doing, youth are demanding decent work, fairness, representation, and a say in government policies (Bush & Nesbitt, 2017).

As we reflect on the ways in which the Tikkun Youth Project utilized PAR to support youth-led initiatives for social change, we are struck by how youth leadership emerged from a praxis that allowed youth to amplify their voices, affirm their commitment to social justice, and speak truth to power. In contrast with conventional forms of practice that tokenize and patronize youth, the Tikkun Youth Project maps an experiential blueprint for youth-led social change--where youth leadership is not simply discussed, but becomes a practical reality.

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- 1 An adapted version of Frisina's (2006) 'back-talk' focus group technique. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/138/304>
- 2 Ontario's general minimum wage will increase to \$14 on January 1, 2018, and \$15 on January 1, 2019. Annual cost of living adjustments will resume thereafter. Retrieved from <https://www.15andfairness.org/demands>
- 3 [T]he ordinary workers in a company or the ordinary members of an organization, and not the leaders. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rank-and-file>
- 4 Community outreach aimed to inform the public by creating table displays and distributing pamphlets and other giveaway materials. Includes engaging with individuals who approach the table requesting information or asking questions. Tabling events serve as an information resource by promoting one-on-one interaction (Geoghan, 2017)