

A STATEMENT FROM THE YWCA: The Tale of Two “Ys”
Does a name change equal confusion?

The announcement that YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) now will be known as ‘the Y’ raises the question of confusion about the public identity of YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association), also known as ‘the Y.’

By way of background, YMCA and YWCA are separately incorporated and each established in the United States more than 150 years ago. With their differences and similarities, the public has been confused about YMCA – YWCA for generations.

Despite having similar acronyms (YMCA and YWCA), sharing the same abbreviated nickname (the Y), and the fact that some local YWCAs and YMCAs merged, these two distinct organizations have different origins and missions.

Since its inception, the YWCA core focus is the empowerment of women and girls, as well as, racial justice. YWCA was first established in the United States in 1858 and spread quickly across the country. Initially, YWCA helped women from rural areas navigate city life and take jobs during the industrial revolution. While its origins are in the Christian tradition, the organization is open to individuals of all backgrounds, and offers programs and services that include men and boys.

YWCA was the first women’s organization in the U.S. It has been part of and survived every wave of the women’s rights movement from the late 19th century until today. YWCA is one of the largest providers of housing and services for domestic violence survivors, child care and youth programs, job training and employment services, financial literacy and economic self-sufficiency programs, basic education and tutoring, low income and transitional housing, health, fitness and aquatics programs, and more.

In addition to its work to empower women and girls, YWCA is less known for its racial justice efforts. Formed five years before the abolition of slavery, YWCA has been engaged in every phase of the Civil Rights Movement. It was one of the earliest social justice organizations that staunchly promoted anti-lynching efforts, racial integration, voting rights, and more recently, affirmative action, opposition to hate crimes and racial profiling, and comprehensive immigration reform.

Unlike YWCA, the YMCA’s core focus is on youth development, health and fitness, and social responsibility. YMCA is not as strongly connected to the civil rights and women’s issues as the YWCA.

Before publicly announcing the rebranding, YMCA of the USA's CEO, Neil Nicoll, shared with YWCA USA CEO, Dr. Lorraine Cole, that the reason for the identity change was to create greater brand uniformity among its local affiliates. Also, according to YMCA research, the change embraced the name already used by the majority of the general public.

However, when YWCA rebranded itself a few years ago, its research led to a different conclusion. YWCA's research indicated that the organization needed to promote its mission. To this end, the YWCA logo was changed to contain the key words of its mission: *eliminating racism, empowering women*. These words appear as part of the YWCA logo in orange to stress their importance.

According to the Cone Nonprofit Power Brand 100, YMCA is the undisputed leader in brand recognition among nonprofit organizations and is number 1 on the Cone list. This is largely due to the strong presence and impact of YMCA facilities and resources in communities worldwide, but also connected to the 1978 song by the Village People which has remained part of pop culture over the past three decades.

“Even with the YMCA rebranding, the public will continue to refer to YWCA as “the Y.” But YWCA should be noted for more than 150 years of advocacy and service as ‘The Y for Women’,” said Dr. Cole. She jokingly added, “If only there were Village *Women* to pen a catchy tune for our name.”

One interesting note is that trademark restrictions prohibit any letter of the alphabet from being trademarked, so neither the YMCA nor the YWCA could legally claim ownership of the letter ‘Y’.

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YWCA USA is a national not-for-profit membership organization that provides social service, advocacy, education and leadership development. It is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. Established in the United States in 1858, the YWCA is the oldest and largest national women's organization. Through its nearly 300 affiliated local YWCAs and its headquarters in Washington, D.C., the YWCA serves 2.5 million women and girls each year. Globally, the YWCA USA is a member of World YWCA, which has affiliates in 103 countries that serve 25 million women and girls worldwide. Visit www.ywca.org. Contact: Elisha Belgrave at 202-467-0801 or ebelgrave@ywca.org.