

THE VOICES OF LATINA SURVIVORS

Encuentro Latino National Institute
on Family Violence

December 2011

www.latinodv.org





History of Encuentro Latino

Encuentro Latino was founded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2008. Encuentro Latino was initially a collaborative project of New Mexico State University's Family Violence Project and La Casa, Inc. (a domestic violence services provider located in Las Cruces, NM).

From 2008 to 2011, the goal of Encuentro Latino was to build the capacity of domestic violence providers to serve Latino families experiencing domestic violence. At the beginning of 2012, Encuentro Latino transitioned to serving as an online clearinghouse for information on domestic violence and Latinos. In 2014, Encuentro Latino was adopted as a project of the International Safe Shelter Foundation.

Originally located in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Encuentro Latino now exists virtually.





THE VOICES OF LATINA SURVIVORS

From August 2008 to December 2011, ten focus groups were conducted with survivors of domestic violence at three domestic violence shelters located along the US/Mexico border. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information from survivors to assist advocates in the provision of culturally sensitive domestic violence services.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

The target demographic of the focus groups was survivors of domestic violence who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latina. The purpose of the focus groups was to identify barriers and challenges that are unique to Hispanics as well as examining how the Hispanic culture creates barriers and opportunities in getting free from violence. The participants' immigration status varied as some were U.S. born citizens, others naturalized U.S. citizens, some legal residents, and others undocumented immigrants. All the focus group participants were female.

The groups focused on the needs and experiences of survivors as they attempted to leave violent situations as well as how culture has an impact on them, with the intention of gathering information that would be useful in training of domestic violence advocates and others who work with victims of domestic violence. Survivors were asked about their identity, traditions, language, religion, and spirituality, as well as their experiences with the shelter, the community, family, law enforcement, medical and mental health providers, community services, and prejudice/racism.



RESULTS

Identity

In asking how the participants identified themselves, they stated that they identified themselves as either Hispanic, Mexican, Latina, or Mexican-American. One stated that she is Caucasian however she had been in a biracial relationship with her Hispanic husband for many years and through years of isolation she now feels more like she identifies with the Hispanic culture rather than her Caucasian one.

In regards to experiences of being a minority and living in the U.S., the majority of participants stated that most of the time, they felt no different than non-minorities. However, some participants did disclose feeling stereotyped by other ethnicities/races as being lazy, having many children, or looking to over-use government assistance. In contrast to the stereotypes, participants indicated that they identify as being hardworking and conscientious and appreciative of government resources and community support.

Often when they felt discriminated against it was by Hispanics who were documented and had an elitist attitude towards them or it was by law enforcement. The participants clearly indicated wanting others (advocates and professionals) to be respectful and open to understanding Mexican culture and values. They noted that values tend to vary by the state a person is from in Mexico and how the person identifies (enculturated, acculturated, or bicultural).¹

Perception of the Shelter

The participants spoke about their impressions of a shelter prior to their arrival. The participants reported that they felt they were stooping low by having to go to a shelter, and that they had never imagined they would have to do so. On the other hand, they felt seeking services at a shelter was an American, independent, and liberal thing to do. When arriving at the shelter, most stated they had a feeling of fear and of uncertainty. Many stated that they were so tired of living in an environment full of control and violence that although they were nervous of the unknown, they were also excited to have a new beginning and be free of the violence.

¹ For more information on enculturation, acculturation, and bicultural, see [this document](#).



In asking how the survivors became aware of the domestic violence shelter where they received services, responses varied. The majority stated that they learned of the shelter as a result of seeking law enforcement help during a violent situation. Others stated that family or friends advised them of the presence of a shelter that could assist with becoming free from the violent situation/relationship. Finally, one participant stated that she learned of the shelter by merely driving by the location then calling the phone number listed and inquiring of the services they provided. The majority stated that the first formal institution where they sought help to get free from violence was either with local law enforcement or the local domestic violence shelter. They also stated that prior to contacting law enforcement or the shelter, they sought out help from their family, however, not wanting to continue burdening their family they decided to seek help elsewhere.

In inquiring about their experience with the shelter they stated that in general their interaction has been positive and they would recommend the shelter to a family member or a friend who found themselves in a similar situation. Of the services that were the most important, they all stated that the counseling services for both themselves and their children were the most helpful in dealing with the trauma that they had gone through. Other services reported as being helpful as well were access to legal consultation, medical services, and transportation to and from their children's medical appointments. They also stated that being free of financial burden had been quite helpful, as the services offered at the shelter are of no cost to them, and all basic necessities are met at no cost to the participants.

Several participants indicated being very appreciative of the donations people in the community bring to the shelter. Furthermore, one participant disclosed her abuser had thrown away all of her clothing and other personal belongings. Through the donations given to the shelter she was able to obtain what she needed. The participants were grateful that as a result of these services they were able to begin the healing process and begin to think about a new life free from violence. Lastly, the survivors stated that the best part about being in the shelter was not having any worries of encountering the abuser and that the feeling of being safe is the best outcome of staying at the shelter.

In terms of services that may be lacking in the shelter, those with small children stated that it was difficult to find employment with no childcare services offered by the shelter. Some also stated that the criteria in which clients receive a



write-up might be too strict resulting in the client feeling that they are being singled out for seemingly small infractions. For instance, some of the participants indicated that staff seemed perfectionist with the way something should be cleaned or how the children should be looked after. Further, they indicated that being written up for something little makes them feel that they left one relationship of power and control just to find themselves in a similar relationship of power and control with shelter staff.

Lastly, participants stated that if there were a company directory stating what each staff member specializes in, it would help new incoming clients navigate through the shelter with more ease. Also, participants indicated it would help to keep track of chores in the shelter in order to ensure that they are divided equally and fairly among everyone residing at the shelter.

Community Perceptions

When asked how the participants felt the community treated women if they choose to leave an abusive relationship, most stated that many members of the community feel that only certain women are victim of domestic violence, i.e. only “poor, Mexican, uneducated, and/or undocumented.” One also stated that she believes that Mexicans see domestic violence as a normal family dynamic. Also, participants stated that people think that they are breaking the unity of the family by seeking services or leaving their partner. Participants discussed that they wished people would understand that the violence endured is damaging to the family (especially the children) much more so than creating a separation within the family.

Several participants indicated their belief that men use sex to oppress and maintain control over women. For instance, several participants indicated being forced to have sex with the abuser in order to obtain money and food for their children. In asking if the participants felt that single women are perceived differently than married women, some stated that they are only perceived differently if they have children. They continued by stating that a women who has children is considered “used” and it will be difficult for them to find a new relationship where their children will be treated the same way their biological father would have treated them. They also stated that this might be one reason that they continued living in the violent relationship, in order to preserve the family unit.



Family

Gender roles between men and women are clearly defined in Hispanic culture. In defining the roles for women, a large majority stated that women were expected to keep the family together which means enduring the abuse as long as it meant that the family unit stays intact. As stated by the participants, women are expected to obey the commands of their husbands as well as be submissive and not question or attempt to change the gender roles. Also, women are expected to clean the home, help the children with homework, and have food ready for when the husband gets home from work.



Across the various focus groups, participants stated that they were told that they were required to “carry their cross” which means endure the burdens that come along with marriage. Gender roles for men were very different than those of the women in the families. Many of the participants stated that their husbands had the freedom to do as they wished without having to answer to their wives. They also stated that men were expected to be “macho” and be in charge of all decisions and the business of the family. The participants disclosed that they wished the men were more loyal, respectful, open/flexible, and communicative towards them and their children. In addition, the participants wished that men were more open to sharing responsibility as a couple, including being equally supportive towards each other, enjoying and appreciating each other, and living in peace.

When deciding to leave the relationship, there were mixed responses as to whether or not they received support from their families and their in-laws. The majority stated that their mother-in-laws advised them to stay in the relationship and to continue to try to make it work (for many of them this is what their mothers did when they were in a similar situation). Others stated that their mother-in-laws advised them to leave, as they felt their son would not change his violent behavior. Some also stated that the abuser would isolate them from any family members or friends who might be a potential helping force in them becoming free from the violence.

In terms of intergenerational family violence, the majority of participants stated that both the abusers and themselves lived in a home where they witnessed domestic violence as children. They believed that the abuser learned the violent behaviors as a child by watching his parents go through the same violent cycle. They also expressed concern that their children would repeat the



behaviors that they saw at home and therefore were grateful that the shelter provided the children with counseling services.

Law Enforcement

The majority of participants reported the first contact with law enforcement was in the U.S. and as a result of the domestic violence. There were mixed sentiments when discussing law enforcement. Some were grateful for the presence of law enforcement because with the help of law enforcement they found or were referred to the domestic violence shelter. Others, however, did not have the same regard for law enforcement.

One participant stated that of the nine years she lived with the abuser, she decided to contact the police on two separate occasions, however in those two attempted contacts with law enforcement, not once did they make it to her house. Another participant stated that when law enforcement responded to her call, she was told by one officer that “Mexicans only come to the U.S. to cause trouble and she would be better off returning to Mexico.” Finally, one participant stated that after contact with the officer, she attempted to pick up a copy of the police report from the police station and to her dismay the officer failed to make a report.

Of the survivors who stated they felt that they had been discriminated against, the majority stated that it was by the law enforcement agencies where they experienced the most discrimination. About half of the participants stated they would not call law enforcement if they ever were in a similar situation again – instead they would seek alternate means of resolving their issue.

The participants reported that their legal status was used by the abuser to oppress, keep them under control, or keep them from contacting law enforcement. Furthermore, one participant said that her mother-in-law would threaten to call Border Patrol and told her that her children would be taken away. Another participant indicated that her husband would threaten to call Border Patrol to take her back to Juarez. Several participants said that their legal status made them even more fearful to contact the police for fear of deportation and risk of being separated from their children. One participant (who identified as being undocumented) indicated that she was so desperate to leave the violent relationship and save her children that she called the police for help even though she feared that she would be deported or separated from her children.



Religion

In asking the participants if they felt that their religion was an obstacle or a helping force in getting free from violence, they had varied responses. Of those who felt that religion was an important aspect in their lives, they stated that their belief in a higher power was a helping force as they felt that at some point God would lead them out of the situation. One participant stated, “We have faith in God and he guides us. He is the one who has opened the doors for us to thrive.” Others stated that they felt that God had them in that situation for a reason and that they had many things to be thankful for.

Some of the participants agreed with one when she stated that it was not her religion that was a barrier, rather it was church clergy that were the barriers. She stated that when she approached the pastor’s wife and discussed her plans of leaving the relationship as a result of the violence she was met with countless scriptures stating why she should stay in the relationship. Another participant indicated seeking help from church members, and she was told there was no help or shelters for such issues and she should try her best to just make things work in her marriage. Others were told by church elders that marriage, according to their religion, was a lifelong commitment and that they needed to continue praying that the abuser would change his ways. Lastly, one participant stated that not only did the church elders urge her to continue working at the relationship but the abuser himself would also manipulate her by using bible verses stating why she should stay in the relationship.

Participants were also asked in the focus groups if they ever thought the abuse was punishment from God. All the participants indicated that they did not think such violence was coming from God’s will. They saw God as merciful and not punitive. In addition, participants were asked if they saw the Virgin Mary as a role model. The majority of participants indicated that they did not see the Virgin Mary as their role model but they do believe in God and pray to him regularly.

Medical and Mental Health

The majority of the participants reported experiencing both physical and emotional symptoms as a result of the domestic violence. Common emotional symptoms as a result of being a survivor of domestic violence were anxiety, continued fear of the perpetrator, anger, depression, and traumatic flashbacks. One participant stated that while feeling similar symptoms, she believes that



there have been positive emotional consequences such as increased emotional strength. She believes that as a result of the violence she is now a very strong person and she believes that through many years of being “beat down” she now knows that she can come out of it a stronger, more self-sufficient person.

In regards to seeking counseling services at the shelter, the majority of the participants stated that they utilized the counseling services offered by the shelters for both themselves and their children. They believe that their children being witness to the abuse may have caused damaging effects, therefore, the participants are doing what they can to minimize the likelihood that their children will become perpetrators or victims themselves.

In addition, a few of the participants disclosed being diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety. One participant indicated she was prescribed medication for depression and indicated being willing to start on it because she believes it will help. All the participants indicated that the counseling was quite helpful to them. In addition, participants suggested advice to counselors in order to best help Latino/a clients. Specifically participants indicated that in counseling it is helpful to be supportive and build a trusting relationship, process the various options they have when feeling stuck with a decision, and asking questions instead of assuming or telling them what to do.

In terms of physical symptoms, some of the participants indicated never sought medical attention. One participant indicated not seeking medical attention even though her forehead was “split in half.” Multiple participants stated that the abuse was so severe that they ended up in the hospital from a few to multiple times during their relationship. Most of the injuries sustained were not permanent.

A few stated that they sustained more severe injuries such as broken bones and lost teeth. One stated that her injuries were so severe and long lasting that she now suffers seizures, memory loss, and confusion. In general, the participants indicated the last time they had a physical examination ranged from a year ago to five years ago. In addition, the participants indicated that the shelter recommended that they visit a medical doctor and/or dentist, which they reported as being quite helpful.



Tradition and Spirituality

Many stated that their tradition and spirituality is very important to them. For instance, upholding the traditional foods (i.e. *tamales*, *champurado*, *pozole*) and celebrating traditional Latino/a holidays (i.e. the Virgin Mary's birthday, Day of the Candelaria) were considered important. Some participants indicated newer generations are more open to changing times and traditions, and they considered it important to adapt. Some stated that they believe the reason they stayed in a violent relationship is because of the values that are held by Hispanics such as the ones stating that women are in charge of maintaining the household and that they must stay in marriage at all costs.

Language

The majority of the participants indicated that it is important to speak both Spanish and English. One participant stated that her husband did not allow her to speak Spanish because he was not a Spanish speaker and he believed that when she did speak Spanish that she was talking about him. She stated that it was very difficult not being able to speak the language she grew up speaking, as she felt disconnected from her culture. Many also stated that it is important that they learn English; as living in the U.S. it is essential to be able to communicate with those around them. Some have even begun to take English classes to become proficient in both languages. Lastly, one participant indicated missing her Spanish-English dictionary that was left behind during the move.

With regards to speaking English, all of the participants indicated they have tried to learn English. One participant indicated that learning English had been quite challenging as if her brain just does not grab the new language. Several participants indicated wanting the shelter to offer English classes.

Community Services

The participants were asked about the roles men and women have in the community. The participants indicated that men are praised for being "*machistas*" and irresponsible with their family. They also spoke about how the role of men varies by ethnicity/race. For white men, the community expects them to be liberal and not as jealous as Latino men. For Latina women, the community expects them to clean the home and tend to the husband and children. The participants believe the community needs to change the outlook they have for women and men in the community to that of a partnership that shares responsibility (e.g. "the relationship needs to be 50/50").



The participants stated that with the help of community services such as those offered by the shelter, they have been able to become free from violence. They believe that one service that the community lacks is an evening day care center for their children. One participant stated that she goes to school during the day and would like to work in the evening to begin saving money but there is no place where she can take her children. Another participant indicated seeking assistance from the court system as a result of the domestic violence. The participant indicated her experience with the court system had not been a good one due to the language barrier and being accused of being the aggressor. The participant indicated being fearful that she would be judged unfairly and sent back to her country.

Prejudice/Racism

The majority of the participants stated that at one point or another in their process of becoming free from violence they had felt discriminated against. Participants stated that law enforcement personnel were often the ones who made over-generalizations about Hispanics and domestic violence and were often threatening in their presence. It was not unusual for the law enforcement officers to state that they would contact Border Patrol if they continued to be called out to the residence. On one occasion, one participant shared that a law enforcement officer stated that “Mexicans only come to the U.S. to have babies and steal jobs” and there were no legal repercussions for the perpetrator.

The participants that are undocumented stated that they felt discriminated against by Hispanics that have legal status. Some stated that their partners who were documented would use their immigration status as a tool to maintain control and humiliate them. Another participant stated that her neighbor, a Hispanic who is documented, stated that she was a “wetback” and should return to her country of origin.

Experiences of Women from Mexico

With one exception, all of those who had come from Mexico stated that while in Mexico they were not aware of the existence of shelters for victims of domestic violence. The one exception had been in contact with a shelter in Juarez, Mexico which then referred the client to the shelter in the US. Women from Mexico shared being told that they should be obedient or that they should put up with the violence because they were married. They felt that being in a



violent marriage was “a chain that does not break” and that it was unacceptable socially for the wife to try to break the chain.

They also shared not feeling comfortable calling the police in Mexico, and that their concerns were down-played or that they were told that the abuse wasn’t that bad. One woman shared that it wasn’t safe to go to the hospital because then the hospital would call the police. The police would respond by locking the abuser into jail for 2-3 days and then would release him. The abuser would leave the jail even angrier than when entering and was a threat to the victim.

Some stated that churches in Mexico do not like to talk about domestic violence—they treat it as if it doesn’t exist. One participant felt that this was because the pastors were also “machisto.” Others shared positive experiences of being supported by church members.

There were mixed responses as to who they would like to have working with them. One said that she felt like a worker in the field of domestic violence should have a personal experience with domestic violence, because workers without that experience “don’t know what it’s like.” Others said that they did not feel that this was necessary. And while some said that they would prefer working with a Hispanic, they also stated that they would be willing to work with anyone as long as that person spoke their language and was compassionate.

CONCLUSION

In terms of barriers to getting free from violence that are unique for the Hispanic survivors, these range from immigration status to the inability to speak English. Immigration status was a huge fear and barrier for the undocumented participants as they often stated that it was the reason they stayed in the relationship for as long as they did. For many participants it was not until they felt somewhat secure that they would not be asked questions regarding their immigration status at the shelter that they proceeded to seek assistance.

Others stated that their inability to speak English was a large barrier. Not only did they need a translator when speaking to non-Spanish speakers, they also needed help in many things like reading signs, filling out paperwork and seeking employment which often made them reliant on the abuser. Finally, a few participants who had recently come to the United States felt very out of



their element and comfort zone. They stated that there are many differences in the dynamics between the US and Mexico even though the proximity is close. Some differences stated were the currency, primary language, government, and lack of camaraderie between neighbors.

In providing domestic violence services to Hispanic survivors, it is important for shelter employees and advocates to understand there are unique barriers that Hispanic survivors encounter when breaking free from violence. Barriers such as the inability to speak English, immigration status, and lack of support at multiple levels (family, church members, law enforcement, community), not only increases the difficulty of leaving the violent relationship but also can prolong the time endured in a violent relationship. It is important that staff approaches and assists clients in an empathetic and supportive manner as well as demonstrates sensitivity to the cultural traditions and values each individual may have.

Although it may be challenging for a shelter to find a middle ground between maintaining functionality and safety in a shelter without emulating the same power and control that survivors are attempting to break free from, it is worth reflecting on and with this awareness begin efforts to minimize such effects. Maintaining good boundaries as well as having an open line of communication with residential clients might help in easing the transition into and out of the shelter. In addition, shelters should recognize the multiple barriers faced by Hispanic clients and take steps to reduce or eliminate those barriers.

MANY THANKS

to Lisa Gomez and Lorena Navarro

for conducting the focus groups