Echoes from the Silence
Raising Our Voices

Report by Mujeres Unidas y Activas
August 2009
**Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA)**

*Mujeres Unidas y Activas* (MUA) is an organization of Latina immigrant women with a dual mission of personal transformation and community activism. For nearly 20 years, MUA has provided a safe haven for Latina immigrant women and their families experiencing domestic violence, economic exploitation and violations of their human rights. Through educational workshops, support groups, peer counseling, leadership trainings, and community education and organizing campaigns implemented by and for immigrant women, MUA has ensured that Latina immigrant women’s voices are heard in the struggle to end domestic violence and ensure culturally appropriate health and prevention services for immigrant women.

MUA defines Domestic Violence as a form of behavior used by one person to maintain power and control over another person. Such forms of behavior include the following characteristics:

- Domestic violence happens within the family, is silent, hidden and maintained by social and cultural norms, such as Machismo.
- Physical violence is not the only form of abuse. There is also emotional, sexual, and financial abuse, including insults, intimidation, threats, and rape, which are all part of an abusive relationship.
- Domestic violence impacts and is impacted by other forms of violence, such as political violence, (i.e. the incarceration of undocumented immigrants); community violence, (i.e. neighborhoods with high levels of crime and little resources); economic violence (i.e. exploitation of immigrant labor).
- For immigrant women, threats about immigration status are often be used by their partners as a form of power and control.
- Domestic violence occurs between partners such as spouses, boy/girlfriends, LGBTQ partners, senior citizens and their caretakers, parents and kids and/or relatives, prostitutes and their clients, pimp or madame, as well as with victims of persecution and human trafficking.
- Although domestic violence can impact anyone, most victims are women and children.

Through the work of MUA and other organizations working for women’s empowerment; immigrant women are discovering, defining and responding to the violence experienced in their daily life.
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Executive Summary

It is commonly believed that the incidence of domestic violence in the Latino community is higher than official statistics indicate but go unreported to law enforcement due to the isolation and fear that Latina immigrant survivors experience. As a result, MUA initiated this study to understand the experiences of Latina immigrant survivors of domestic violence, explore the types of services currently offered, and evaluate the barriers to accessing these services by this community.

MUA conducted a survey of 148 Latina immigrant women and found that 8 out of 10 women had experienced some form of domestic violence. They conducted the survey in 2008 and when reviewing the results noted that a high percentage (69%) of women were not going to shelters. They followed up with two focus groups – one for women who did go to a shelter and another for those that chose not to – to understand better the low usage of shelters.

Barriers to and Accessing of Services

There are various barriers that women must confront when escaping situations of violence. The survey found that principal obstacles are fear of being alone (42%), lack of work (41%), and lack of housing options (39%). Additionally, one-third (36%) of the women did not know about services. The impact on their children is also a worry for many (39%) of the women. One’s immigration status is a prohibitive factor for some (26%) of the women.

Latina immigrant women experiencing domestic violence prefer resources that do not lead to family separation, displacement, or criminal justice intervention. For many of these women, immigration status determines their sense of the possibilities that exist for escaping domestic violence situations. The survey found that, in addition to not using shelters, some of the women (18%) were not accessing any domestic violence services. For those that were accessing services, they tended to use support groups (51%) and therapy (48%). Least used were legal resources like visas U and T and VAWA. Only one-third (33%) of the women reported to getting a restraining order. Forty percent (40%) of the women surveyed said that they had never made a report to the police.

The Need for Comprehensive Services in Spanish

Access to Spanish is an important aspect of service delivery. In the survey, almost half of the women (44%), some times or usually received translation, though not always, when accessing domestic violence services. For those that reported to the police, thirty-eight percent (38%) said that they did not receive translation. Furthermore, for those that did access domestic violence services, one-third (33%) expressed having felt some type of discrimination – with most feeling discriminated due their inability to speak English or for being Latina.

Challenges in Using the Shelter System

In both focus groups, women that had gone to shelters reflected on why others do not seek services from shelters. They identified concern about the impact on their children, feelings of isolation especially for women who are new to the US, lack of information, and bad experiences of their peers as key deterrents. For those women that did not use shelters, prohibitive factors discussed included long waitlists, lack of support in Spanish, having adolescent kids who are not allowed to live in the shelters, not having kids and thus not having the same access to the shelters as women who have younger children. Women experiencing emotional and/or psychological violence indicated a lack of services and support compared to women experiencing physical and/or sexual violence.

Certain improvements were pointed out that included Spanish speaking personnel at all times, after school and mental health programs for children and youth, support to prevent abuse amongst residents and personnel, and support to navigate legal and support systems.

Recommendations

MUA offers the following recommendations to improve domestic violence services for Latina immigrant women:

- **Strengthen Networks of Community Support**: so that Latina immigrant women find information about educational resources and organizations in the places that they go to everyday and in their language. Support and strengthen community organizations and support groups that are led by Latina immigrant women.
- **Recruit Trained Monolingual Women for Domestic Violence Service Provision**: Domestic violence crisis services will be enriched and cultural competency will be expanded if monolingual women who are trained to give services and respond to the needs of their peers are recruited to serve on staff.
- **Create and Deepen Collaborations**: Create collaborations between service providers rooted in and led by the immigrant community and service providers such as shelters and legal service providers that may or may not be immigrant led.
- **Improve Professional Services**: It is necessary that domestic violence service providers understand the reality of immigrant survivors of violence and respond to their needs adequately. Immigrant clients require support throughout the entire process and specific assistance navigating complex legal and public support systems. It is critical that women understand all options and possibilities at every moment.
- **Respect and Support Different Processes of Healing**: MUA promotes a collective response to domestic violence that ends isolation. Part of this is based on an acknowledgement that a woman who is or has passed through domestic violence is often best suited to help her peers experiencing something similar and that in so doing she helps to advance her own and others’ healing.
- **Prioritize Funding for Community based Organizations and Services**: Now more than ever we need to strengthen emergency services for families. Without funding, our shelters, domestic violence agencies, and community-based organizations will not have the resources needed to continue the important work of ending and responding to domestic violence.

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*Echoes from the Silence | Raising Our Voices*
In July 2007, MUA initiated a campaign about the main challenges Latina immigrants face when they experience domestic violence and begin seeking help. As a result of the testimonies that Latina immigrant women provided about their experience of not finding the necessary support in their language at existing domestic violence service agencies, MUA decided to initiate this study.

Language barriers, distrust of social services, lack of information, and fear of legal systems are some of the factors that make Latina immigrant survivors of domestic violence particularly vulnerable. Living in constant fear of being deported, undocumented Latina immigrants have greater distrust of law enforcement and are less likely to contact the police. These challenges, along with the difficulties of ending isolation and leaving abusive relationships, need to be understood by those who want to better the quality of life for Latina immigrant women and their families.

The study showed that Latina immigrant women are a vulnerable population and the need for culturally appropriate services and linguistic competency must be taken into account.

The main objective of this report is to improve the quality of domestic violence services offered to Latina women in Spanish, and open spaces where the realities of Latina immigrant survivors of violence are heard, understood, and valued.

The report begins with an overview of the prevalence of domestic violence in California and its specific impact amongst Latina immigrant women in San Francisco and Alameda counties. Section 2 explores key barriers that Latina women must face when escaping domestic violence. These barriers are important to understand since they impact the types of services and support that is needed. Section 3 reviews the various services available and those that are and are not accessed by Latina women. Section 4 looks specifically at shelters to explore why women are not using them. Finally, MUA sets forward solutions and recommendations that can improve systems and support for Latina immigrants.

Methodology
This study was carried out between June and December of 2008 and used surveys, focus groups and group discussions of the results. The study was a participatory process that started with a survey MUA members conducted within the organization’s membership and their social and familial networks. The results of the survey were discussed during membership meetings to better understand the statistics in connection with the experiences of women in the group. Comments made during those meetings were captured and are included with the results.

One of the key results in this study is that the majority of the women surveyed (69%) hadn’t gone to a shelter when they were experiencing domestic violence. To know more about this finding, MUA followed up with two focus groups. One focus group explored the experiences of Latina immigrants who had lived in domestic violence shelters. The second focus group included Latina immigrant survivors of domestic violence who
had left their situation with the support of family members, friends, and/or support groups as well as Latina immigrants still living with intimate partner violence.

This report includes findings from the focus groups and surveys; it also includes testimonies and recommendations from the group discussions that occurred amongst MUA grassroots leadership when they reviewed the findings.

Study Participants
The survey included 148 total women participants, a majority of them from Mexico and Central America as well as other Latin American countries. All of the participants in the study are residents of the San Francisco Bay Area between the ages of 18 and 55 years old.

The first focus group that explored the experiences of Latina immigrants who had lived in domestic violence shelters consisted of 10 women, the majority of them from Mexico and mothers of three to seven children. These participants stayed in a shelter between 2003 and 2007, and all of the women, except for one, completed their shelter program.

The second focus group was made up of 18 women, the majority originally from Mexico between the ages of 20 and 50 years old, who did not go to a shelter and chose to seek support from within personal networks, friends, or support groups to escape domestic violence. Half of the women that participated had left their situations of domestic violence, and over one third (39%) indicated that they were still living with intimate partner violence when the focus group was held. Two participants had no comment.

Data Analysis
MUA would like to thank Maria Pilar Tudela Vasquez for her assistance in design and implementation of the focus groups, analysis of the surveys, facilitation of staff and member discussions about the results, and summary of the study’s results. Additionally, MUA thanks Saba Waheed and the DataCenter for reviewing the data, designing the graphs, and organizing the report’s content. The Data Center is a fully-integrated research, training and strategy center serving poor and working class communities of color organizing for social justice. In partnership with grassroots social justice organizations, the Data Center plays an integral role in making information accessible, engaging communities in research, recognizing and drawing out community expertise, and building community capacity to strategically apply research in organizing and policy work.

1 California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center.

2 From “I Tried to Stop Them: Children’s Exposure to Domestic Violence in San Francisco,” a project of U.S. Department of Justice’s Safe Start Initiative that reviewed more than 3,000 felony investigation files between June 2003 and December 2004 and some 16,500 calls to 911 between January 2003 and December 2005. It also analyzed internal police reports between January 2001 and May 2006.
High Frequency of Violence

MUAs survey found a high occurrence of domestic violence amongst the immigrant Latina women. The results showed that 8 out of 10 women had experienced some form of violence.

Of those women that had experienced any form of violence, they were most impacted by verbal and physical violence. Eight-five percent (85%) indicated having experienced verbal violence and almost three quarters (73%) experienced physical violence. One quarter of the women (26%) had experienced sexual violence.

In addition, violence tends to take on multiple forms. For example, one MUA leader described the emotional violence that occurs within those experiencing sexual violence: “Sexual violence is as much being forced to do the act as much as humiliation or being told that you smell like this or not.”

Survey results showed that of the women that identified having experienced physical violence, eighty-five percent (85%) also dealt with verbal violence; twenty-nine percent (29%) had experienced sexual violence.

The survey results indicate the pervasiveness of domestic violence among Latina women as well as the many different types of violence Latina immigrants face. In addition to being able to speak up about violence in one’s life, there is then the issue of response and access to services and crossing of another set of cultural and language barriers. The next section explores various personal, cultural and societal barriers that Latina immigrant women must face when escaping situations of violence.

Table 1: Violence Experienced by Latina Immigrant Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience of Violence</th>
<th>Experienced one or more forms of violence</th>
<th>81%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Violence Experienced</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Forms of Violence</td>
<td>Experienced Physical and Verbal Violence</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experienced Physical and Sexual Violence</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MUA Survey 2009

Another issue for women escaping violence is immigration status. One member described how “[m]any times, a woman is threatened by her husband about being reported to immigration or that in this country her children can be taken away if she speaks.” For these women, immigration status determines their understanding of what possibilities exist for escaping domestic violence. One in four women (26%) felt their immigration status was an obstacle to escaping violence.
There are a range of services available to women when escaping violence. Having services that are appropriate for Latina immigrant women is hugely important especially given that reporting violence and seeking services is low for this community. Access to services in Spanish is a main priority. Other important factors in providing appropriate services include safety in accessing legal services and police (especially in connection to immigration status), impact on children, being treated with dignity, and having community support.

**Experience of Accessing Services**

MUA’s survey found that most women were not accessing shelters and others were not accessing any domestic violence services. Almost seventy percent (69%) of the women that identified having experienced domestic violence did not go to a shelter. (Shelters will be explored more in-depth in Section 4).

Furthermore, eighteen percent (18%) of the women recalled not having gone to a domestic violence service provider agency. For those that did go, twenty percent (21%) reported that they were not taken care of well.

Once there, having complete access to Spanish speakers or translation is hugely important. Almost half of the women (44%) some times or usually received translation, though not completely. The other half (54%) reported that they received translation all of the time. But, as one leader notes, even receiving translation can be challenging: “There are telephone hotlines where there is a translator but sometimes they change what you say. What you say is not exactly what they are translating.”

For those that did access domestic violence services, almost one third (33%) expressed having felt some type of discrimination. They felt they experienced such discrimination because they didn’t speak English or for being Latina.

**Table 2: Experiences of Domestic Violence Services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domestic Violence Services</th>
<th>Access to Spanish Translation</th>
<th>If Experienced Discrimination, Type Experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Accessed</td>
<td>Access to Spanish Translation</td>
<td>Feeling discriminated for not speaking English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not go to a domestic service provider agency</td>
<td>Received translation all of the time</td>
<td>Feeling discriminated for being Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not go to a Shelter</td>
<td>Received translation usually or some of the time</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never received translation</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Experience at Domestic Violence Agencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience at Domestic Violence Agencies</th>
<th>Feelings of Discrimination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience was good</td>
<td>Did not feel discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Taken Care of Well</td>
<td>Experienced some feeling of discrimination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MUA Survey 2009

The above obstacles are important to recognize so that the services are provided help Latina immigrants move beyond these barriers. Resources that do not lead to family separation, displacement, or criminal justice intervention could address many of these obstacles. The next two sections explore what services and resources Latina immigrants access and some of their experiences with these services.
MUA leader describes how challenging accessing services can be during an already troubling time:

In general, those that help you from domestic violence agencies understand you, but you also find yourself in situations where... it seems to them that your situation is very easy... I don't expect a red carpet when I arrive but sometimes you find yourself with people that make you feel horrible. They make you feel like you're lying or like they're not paying attention to you and don't help you.

Types of Services that are Accessed

The below chart shows which services women are utilizing. The highest usage of services was support groups and therapy. The lowest were the usage of legal resources like visas U and T and VAWA. Also less utilized were restraining order and crisis lines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domestic Violence Services Accessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restraining Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visa U or Visa T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAWA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey did find, however, that women that did access services tended to access multiple types of services. Almost half (46%) of the women accessed 2-4 different types of services. Twenty eight percent (28%) accessed only one service and almost one-fifth (18%) didn’t access any services.

Therapy, Support Groups and Crisis Lines

Therapy and support groups were used the most by Latina immigrant women. More than half (51%) of the women surveyed that identified having experienced domestic violence chose therapy as a resource. Forty-eight percent (48%) sought support groups.

One quarter (25%) said that they called a crisis line. Latina immigrant women are most likely to receive services in Spanish when they go to therapy and support groups. Also these services do not imply family separation or police intervention.

Restraining Order and Other Legal Resources

The survey found that very few women have benefited from legal resources available for victims of violence. A small portion of the women that identified having experienced domestic violence applied for the VAWA1 visa (6%) and U or T2 visa (14%).

The onerous task of proving the violence was pointed out as being a reason for not accessing this service: “When you go to apply to VAWA, what counts most is proof of battery... I bring in I-don’t-know-how-many reports, even witnesses to testify, but it’s not enough. They want strong cases, so strong that you end up in the hospital or with your head split open…”

Restraining orders were also not heavily utilized by women. A MUA leader describes how women that arrive at MUA and have experienced domestic violence did not want to place a restraining order because they worried that their husbands would be deported, lose jobs or that it would ultimately affect their children.

Only one third (33%) of the women resorted to getting a restraining order.

Calling the Police

In addition to the above resources, there is also the issue of calling and making reports to the police. In the survey, it was clear that calling the police was not an option many of the women explored. Forty percent (40%) of the women surveyed said that they had never made a report to the police.

Of those that did call the police, almost half of the women (40%) found the experience of calling the police difficult and another 26% found it confusing. Thirty five percent (35%) said it was easy.

In addition, for those that reported to the police, thirty eight percent (38%) said that they did not receive translation. One leader spoke to her experience of trying to place a police report:

In three different reports I’ve had to make to the police, none of the agents that came spoke Spanish nor did they provide translation. I had to explain myself using hand signs because I would not bring in my children to translate. This affects me because they distort the situation. I can’t have a visa because of what they wrote in the report. I can’t do a lot of things because the way things really happened was not written correctly.

Table 3: Experience with Police

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reports to Police</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never Made Report to Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience if Reported to Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience was difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience was confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience was easy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access to Translation When Reporting to Police</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Received Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Receive Translation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MUA Survey 2009
Community Based Support

Often, Latina immigrant women prefer seeking help within their own social networks rather than seeking resources from domestic violence service providers. As one woman noted, “the most common thing is to ask a neighbor or close friend, who are in an equal if not worse situation and that’s why they don’t seek agencies, rather prefer popular advice.”

Support from both domestic violence service agencies and relatives and/or friends are critical in helping Latina immigrant escape domestic violence and better their quality of life. Many of the women surveyed identified having support from agencies (35%) and family members and friends (31%) to leave their situation.

Women that left their intimate violence situation went to the home of friends or family members (26%), stayed in the home when their partner left (24%), or found a new home (22%).

To respond to the needs of Latina immigrant women experiencing domestic violence, it is necessary to create and strengthen community-based resources. Latina immigrant women need community solutions to domestic violence. Economic opportunities, opportunities to build their self-esteem, mutual support and resources that take into account the necessities of their children are essential.

Table 4: Factors and Support in Escaping Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Support for Escaping Violence</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agencies</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/friends</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where they Went when Leaving Domestic Violent Situation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home of friends or Family Members</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed in their Home Where Their Partner Left</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found a New Home</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MUA Survey 2009

Seven out of ten women that experienced violence did not choose to go to a domestic violence shelter. Yet, the survey found that a key barrier to escaping violence was lack of housing options. It is useful to analyze the experiences of both Latina immigrant women who have and haven’t chosen to utilize the resources available through domestic violence shelters. By understanding why Latina immigrants have or haven’t chosen to go to domestic violence shelters, those who work within the shelters can better meet the needs of their Latina immigrant clients. It will also help Latina immigrant survivors of violence understand the challenges and difficulties they may face if they choose this resource.

This section will begin with results from the survey from those that did go to a shelter. It will then be followed by summaries from two focus groups – one consisting of women that used shelter and the second that did not.

Survey results indicate that many women (41%) found the experience of going to the shelter to be average. Fifteen percent (15%) said it was bad. Most of the shelters did accept their children but almost half (46%) did not have services for children.

In addition, many (39%) did not finish the program and 39% said that if they were in the same situation they would not return to the shelter. Also, only one third of the women reported receiving Spanish translation all the time.

Table 5: Experience at Shelters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Experience at the Shelter</th>
<th>Children at the Shelter</th>
<th>Access to Spanish Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience was average</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience was very good</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience was not good</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not finish program</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would not return in same situation</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MUA Survey 2009

3 VAWA is the Violence Against Women Act, approved by the US Congress in 1994, which created specific ways for certain women who are victims of domestic violence to gain permanent residency.

4 The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 created two new visas: the T visa and the U visa, for victims of crimes who are not American citizens. Both visas were created to provide legal status to non-citizens who are helping or desire to help the authorities that investigate a crime.

5 Restraining Order: is when the victim goes to court and the judge decides, based on the abuse or harm, that the abuser should be legally prohibited from coming into contact with his victim. The judge defines how far away the abuser must stay away from his victim for a specific amount of time.

6 Police Report: is when the police document an act in writing, explaining the incident that happened or what the victim testified to, including evidence of battering. With this report, the victim decides whether or not to pursue a restraining order. On occasions, if the police believe that the incident is too intense or if the victim demonstrates being in danger, they will issue an emergency restraining order for 3 or 7 days.
Focus Group 1: Latina immigrant women that have lived in shelters.

The group identified various reasons why Latina immigrant women do not seek resources and support through domestic violence shelters. These reasons include:

- Concern about the impact that leaving home to live in a shelter might have on their children.
- Isolation immigrant women face especially when they have recently arrived in the country.
- Lack of information about resources and rights.
- Bad experiences their peers have had at shelters greatly influence whether or not other women will seek this resource.

This group spoke about characteristics that a shelter must have in order ensure that the program will be accessible and useful for Latina immigrant victims of domestic violence.

- Spanish-speaking personnel at all times. All of the participants claimed that they did not receive services in Spanish at all times. Language barriers are a challenge when women must negotiate rules in times of emergencies, especially when something happens at night.

- Programs for youth in the shelters. The focus group talked about the impact on children when they have experienced domestic violence and then must live in a shelter. They said a good quality shelter must offer therapy, programs and spaces for residents' children to play.

- Support to prevent abuse amongst residents and between personnel and residents. Participants in the focus group indicated that special attention must be paid to the complaints made regarding the behavior of certain residents towards other residents and their children. Various participants pointed out that there were personnel who were very attentive and supportive. At the same time, participants shared that there were also personnel who were defensive, enforced the rules in an unequal manner, and practiced favoritism to benefit some residents over others.

- Support to navigate legal and support systems. Some participants shared that they had a very good experience with their social workers. Other participants expressed feeling frustrated for not having all of the necessary information to have a timely plan to leave the shelter or to apply for public housing and legal help.

- Almost all of the participants said they referred a friend or family member to a shelter in the case of domestic violence. Along with having a roof over your head, food, and security, some participants shared that they had good experiences learning how to value the support and solidarity of those they found at times of crisis. Other participants cited the possibility of having a space to seek a job and save money as an advantage of entering the domestic violence shelter system.

In general, all of the participants said that going to a shelter offered them an opportunity to improve their quality of life. Because of this, they insisted it was necessary to create communal solutions to ensure that women feel safe and supported and able to make informed decisions about their options when choosing to end the violence in their families.

Focus Group 2: Women that have not lived in a shelter.

Because the majority of the survey respondents said they hadn’t gone to a shelter when going through a crisis of domestic violence, MUA wanted to know more about the circumstances and reasons that kept women from using this resource. The participants in this second focus group identified the following challenges Latinas immigrants survivors of violence face when considering whether or not to go to a domestic violence shelter:

- Long waitlists to be accepted into a shelter.
- Lack of support in Spanish at the time of crisis.
- Having adolescent kids who are not allowed to live in the shelters.
- Not having kids and ultimately not having the same access to the shelters as women who have younger children.
- Lack of services and support when one is experiencing emotional and/or psychological violence, as opposed to experiencing physical and/or sexual violence.

Similar to the first focus group, many women cited the lack of information and support for navigating systems of support, isolation, and comments from other women that had negative experiences in a shelter as main reasons for not having chosen this service in the first place.

The participants in this focus group also shared their opinions and experiences about the advantages and disadvantages of seeking support from family members and friends or relying on oneself when trying to end domestic violence. The participants identified the following:

- Going to a Shelter and/or the police helps to make a woman’s legal case stronger. The group discussed how if a woman wants to apply for a visa or another type of help, her case is stronger when she has lived in a shelter, has placed a restraining order, and has filed police reports. Recognizing these as advantages, the group also discussed the challenges that cause women, for different reasons, to not seek shelter.

- Having to leave your home and change your children’s life is a great disadvantage. Various participants recognized that escaping the situation of violence is a great obstacle despite where you go – whether it is a shelter or the home of family members/friends. It means having to leave your home and being the person to change your own life along with that of your children. The impact on children and not having a job are the most influential factors when making that decision.

- Family networks and friends are a great help, when family relations are healthy, but they can also be a great obstacle. The participants indicated that if they had friends and/or family that could help, they would prefer to seek help within their social networks in the first place. While some women shared experiences of support and solidarity from family and friends, others expressed frustration that they had not received support when trying to escape the relationship. They found themselves unwelcome in the homes of family members and continued experiencing violence there as well.
Cultural, economic, and social experiences determine how women understand domestic violence and its different forms. Latina immigrant women experiencing domestic violence prefer resources that do not lead to family separation, displacement, or criminal justice intervention. For these women, immigration status determines their sense of the possibilities that exist for escaping domestic violence situations. Latina immigrant women need community solutions to domestic violence. Economic opportunities, opportunities to build their self-esteem, mutual support and resources that take into account the necessities of their children are essential. For this reason, MUA offers the following recommendations to improve domestic violence services for Latina immigrant women:

**Strengthen Networks of Community Support.** Latina immigrant women who are in abusive relationships and want to end domestic violence need to find information about educational resources and organizations in the places that they go to every day and in their language. In order to end cultural and linguistic isolation, it is important to support and strengthen community organizations and support groups formed and led by Latina immigrant women who live and work where their peers live.

**Recruit Trained Monolingual Women for Domestic Violence Service Provision.** MUA has trained 70 Latina immigrants as domestic violence counselors through the training approved by the state of California (EC 1037.1). These women are prepared to provide help to their peers and work on crisis lines and at shelters and domestic violence agencies. Domestic violence crisis services will be enriched and cultural competency will be expanded if monolingual women who are trained to give services and respond to the needs of their peers are recruited as staff and volunteers.

**Create and Deepen Collaborations.** Organizations like MUA open the door to the possibility of health and a better quality of life to Latina immigrant women experiencing domestic violence. When a woman decides to leave an abusive relationship it is important that the people who help her in this long and painful path personally understand her and her children’s reality. For this reason, it is important to create collaborations between service providers rooted in and led by the immigrant community and service providers such as shelters and legal service providers that may or may not be immigrant led.

**Improve Professional Services.** It is necessary that professionals who work in domestic violence are trained on a human and professional level to understand the reality of immigrant survivors of violence and respond to their needs adequately. At the same time, it is important that providers support their immigrant clients throughout the entire process helping them to navigate complex legal and public support systems and always presenting at every moment all options and possibilities.

**Respect and Support Different Processes of Healing.** Through our domestic violence service provision model, MUA promotes a collective response to domestic violence that ends isolation amongst those who are experiencing it. Part of this model is based in an acknowledgement that a woman who is or has passed through domestic violence is often best suited to help her peers experiencing something similar and that in so doing she helps to advance her own and others’ healing. It is through collective responses and solidarity that we find the strength for both individual and collective healing from violence.

**Prioritize Funding for Community Based Organizations and Services.** In this current economic crisis, low income families are experiencing great challenges to their quality of life. Now more than ever, we need to strengthen emergency services for families. Without funding, our shelters, domestic violence agencies, and community-based organizations will not have the resources needed to continue the important work of ending and responding to domestic violence.

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**Echoes from the Silence**

**Raising Our Voices**

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

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**Mujeres Unidas y Activas**

**Domestic Violence Report 2009**