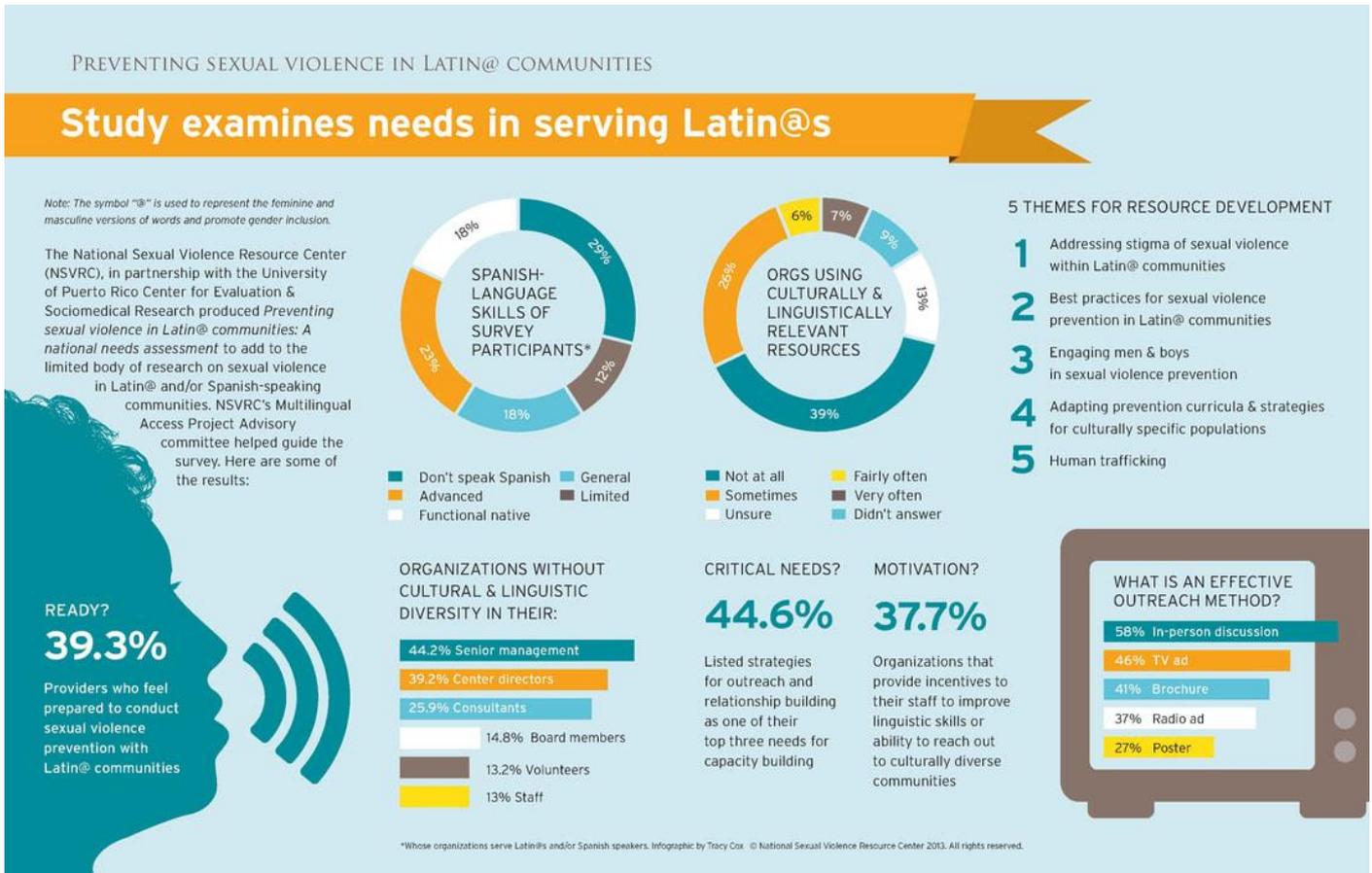


“¡Si Podemos!”: Latinas Can Break the Silence About Violence



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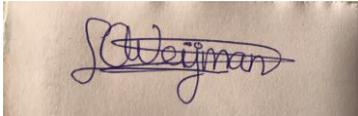
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A photograph of a handwritten signature in blue ink on a light-colored surface. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Lisa Weijman".

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I would also like to thank professor Timothy Marr, who inspired me to do more research on this topic, and he has taught me so much while writing this thesis. It was an honor to be working with him, and I believe that both of us have learned a lot in this short period.

While writing this thesis, I could not find many case stories about Latinas who were victims of domestic violence at first. However, once I found the right keywords, I was able to find a lot and bought books who wrote about this topic. I appreciated reading the victims' stories and I have learned so much, and I want to gain more insight into it because still much is unknown.

Abstract

Intimate partner violence is present in Latinx communities in the United States, and it affects many Latinas.¹ Since the Latinx population is growing, more women will get hurt if nothing is done to address this massive problem. One in three women has experienced domestic violence, but only half of them report it because they fear deportation, do not speak English well enough to report it, do not have enough money to leave their husbands, and fear that their children might get hurt. Many barriers prevent Latinas from reporting domestic violence, and factors such as traditional gender roles, religion, and socioeconomic status constrain Latinas' choices for seeking help. On top of that, Latinas lack confidence in the police, they feel guilty and ashamed, and they blame themselves for what is happening to them. The first response when victims share their stories is exceptionally crucial for the next steps to report Intimate Partner Violence. Legal institutions that should promote reporting are treating clients unequally and they fail to remain impartial. Charitable organizations do not have enough money to provide for every victim, and their shelters are often overcrowded. Domestic violence is an extensive problem in the US, and much needs to be done in order for it to change.

Key words: *cycle of violence, domestic violence, femicide, immigration-related abuse, intimate partner violence, Latinas, machismo, marianismo, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (VTVPA).*

¹ A Latina is a woman who lives in the US and originally comes from, or whose family comes from, Latin America. A Chicana is a woman living in the US and born in Mexico, or whose parents came from Mexico (Cambridge Dictionary). In my thesis, I will use Latina and Chicana interchangeably.

Introduction: Femicide Eradicates Latinas' Option to Report Domestic Violence

On March 8, 2020, International Women's Day was celebrated, and this day will be marked in Mexican history. On Sunday, 80,000 women walked in the streets of Mexico City to strike against gender-based violence. The main goal of these women was to create a turning point in history, where it would be normal to talk about domestic violence and the machismo culture (Sheridan 2020). Slogans like "Fight today so we don't die tomorrow" and "We are the voice of those who are no longer with us" were painted on banners and carried throughout the streets. Gender-based violence has not been talked about in Mexican communities.

Sometimes, women are silenced in the worst way possible: through femicide- "the gender-based murder of a woman or girl by a man" (Merriam-Webster dictionary). In Mexico, this is something that happens almost every day, and the government tries to cover it up. In 2019, the femicide rate rose 10 percent, including 1,010 cases of female-killings, which makes up for ten women a day (Sheridan 2020). Last year, 35,558 homicides were recorded in Mexico, 3,825 of them female victims, and as mentioned before, 1,010 were classified as femicides. Different factors decide whether the case is defined as femicide, but it mostly depends on the relationship the aggressor has with the victim. Females from all age groups are involved in female-killings; such as, Ingrid Escamilla, 25-years-old, and Fátima Cecilia Aldrighett Antón, seven-years-old, which occurred in the month of May (Sieff 2020). Women came out of their shells and tried to raise awareness around the (sexual) harassment of women. The crime against the seven-year-old girl would not go unpunished and social media exploded after the news was told. Parents of these girls, who are abducted and killed, often blame the government for responding too late and doing nothing in the essential stages of an abduction. Family members of the victims try to reach as many people as possible by using social media and many hashtags have been used to remember the lives of these girls.

Femicide shows the extreme silencing of women, but fortunately, not every situation ends in death because some can report the violence and have a safe escape. In the United States, 10,018 homicides of females were reported in the USA between 2003-2014. White and Black females had the highest percentage of murder, but after that, 822 Chicana women were killed, which is 8,2%. Luckily this number in the US is not as high as in Latin American countries (Petrosky et al. 746). In 2019, an estimation was made that over 1.5 per 100,000 Mexican women were killed because of their gender, and it was the highest rate since 2017 (Statista 2019). In the United States, the second-largest ethnic group is the Latino population, which are 50 million people or 16,7% of the entire American population (U.S. Census

Bureau). Gender-based violence is a big problem in the states of the United States that border Mexico: California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, among others, and that is why this thesis will focus on Mexican American women. Over the last three decades, domestic violence of women has been recognized as a public health problem. It is reported that 1 in 3 Latinas have experienced domestic violence, but only 50% who experienced it, report the experience. Furthermore, 63% of victimized Latinas experience multiple acts of victimization (National Latin@ Network 2016). However, it is crucial to keep in mind that, especially now, during a pandemic, violent abuse happens more often because people have to be in quarantine and women become isolated from the rest of the world and exposed to their violent and abusive husbands. Maria Noel Baeza, regional director for U.N. Women, explains: “In a situation of confinement, what is happening is that women are locked up with their own abusers in situations where they have very limited outlets” (Reuters 2020). Luckily during the COVID-19 pandemic, hotlines are opened for women to report an emergency regarding domestic violence. Tara Cookson, director of the feminist research organization Ladysmith, says: “If a woman can't go to her trusted neighbor, or escape to her mother's house, she's that much more isolated and that much more at risk” (Janetsky 2020). During COVID-19, women face more challenges trying to escape when their government decides that the country should be on lockdown. She must choose between either getting infected by the virus or facing domestic violence at home. Furthermore, immigration and asylum cases are postponed, which creates even more dangerous situations for Latinas.

The abuse is a violation of human rights, and women who suffered from the abuse are unable to take care of themselves because the economic division between men and women limits their ability to work. The United Nations General Assembly recognized in 1993 “women’s right to live free of violence in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, as did the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará) in 1994” (Brott, Guedes, Goodwin, Adams Mendoza xv). How women deal with domestic violence depends on their social, legal, and economic status, and that is why the UN talks about gender-based violence because their response depends on their position in society. Many activist sites and organizations have been established to address and deal with domestic violence. One of them, National Latin@ Network, describes 31 facts about domestic violence in Latinx communities. However, not everyone is aware of these facts, but it is crucial to understand because multiple factors constrain Latinas’ choices, and they face many challenges when reporting domestic violence. If Americans knew more about the huge amount of domestic violence victims, they

could help women and make them believe that there is hope for victims of Intimate Partner Violence or IPV.

While reading my thesis, it is crucial to highlight that not all Latinos are the same and not all are abusing their wives. This thesis gives examples of women around the Mexican border, who have experienced domestic violence; however, research is difficult because many do not want to, or they cannot, reveal their identity because they are still in danger. This shows that the silencing of these victims is still ongoing, and they still cannot speak for themselves. This essay tries to answer the question: to what extent is domestic violence among Mexican American women constraining their choices and what are the challenges of providing support networks that might break the silence about violence? It will conclude by saying that women are still silenced, and they cannot share their stories for multiple reasons. For example, they do not have the financial means to leave the violent relationship, they dare not leave because of their family expectations, their illegal status in the United States makes it hard to report, the language barrier prevents them from reporting it, because of their children they are unable to leave the relationship. Most of all, Mexicans and Mexican Americans believe in the culture of honor, so women ought not to leave the relationship because they will humiliate their family.

This thesis is imperative for American Studies scholarship because it is an ongoing topic; there is still violence in Latin American households, and due to COVID-19, it is now more than ever. We now all know how it feels to be “locked-up” in your own house, and luckily, many people can be free after the pandemic is over, but this is not true for everybody. In our American Studies program, not much attention is being paid to minorities, and when they are discussed, mostly, it includes black people. However, as mentioned before, the Latinx population is increasing every day, so it will give voice to many unheard women in this thesis. Nevertheless, there is not enough awareness and research because women are often too anxious to speak up and report domestic violence. This makes it problematic because the statistics are not accurate and up to date. My research is a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. Mónica Russel y Rodríguez, Angelica S. Reina and Brenda J. Lohman, and Jennifer Hirsch helped me gain insight into the quantitative aspect of my thesis because they explained the theoretical concepts based on surveys. Dorothee M. Dietrich and Jessica M. Schuett’s investigation was useful because they provided many statistics. Jenna Knapp, Brianna Muller, Alicia Quiros, Roberta Villalón, Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa were able to interview women, making my thesis more personal, and it hopefully enables readers to empathize with Latin American women. Cisneros and Anzaldúa were able

to use their platform as Latinas to give the unheard victims a voice. However, their books: *The House on Mango Street* by Cisneros, and *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Anzaldúa, are creative and imaginary which helps creating an understanding even though it is non-academic. I chose this type of research because there is little knowledge of Latinx communities' situation, even though the Latinx community is spread throughout the United States. It is imperative to give minorities a voice and let them be heard. It was hard for me to find a specific case study because many victims of IPV do not want to speak up or do not get the chance to do so. When Latinas speak up, it is often in Spanish, which I can understand reasonably, but not enough to build this thesis on.

First of all, I wanted to outline the reasons for domestic abuse and explain the “justification” for many Latinos to behave violently. It was useful to explain why the culture of honor is imperative in Latinx communities. Second, it was necessary to outline the arguments for why women do not report IPV. Many people often blame women for not leaving the violence, which makes women even more insecure. My thesis analyzes why it is crucial to empathize with victims of IPV and listen to victims that many Latin American researchers did, which was beneficial for my research. The third part of this essay will focus more on current organizations that try to enhance women's situations and help women escape a violent relationship. It will clarify why specific organizations are more beneficial than others and why some victims are granted a visa and others not. In these times of demonstrations about the seriousness of discrimination against minorities, Latinas must be given a voice and be heard.

Chapter 1: Culture of Honor Code is Approving Domestic Violence

The last few decades show that there has been an increasing number of Mexican immigrants in the United States. The border states in the south of the United States have seen a rapid influx of Mexican immigrants and this has led to a change in the demographic population. Looking at the Mexican population in 2014, the Chicano population in California was 48%. In Texas and Florida, it was 39%, and in Arizona, it was 31% (Stepler and Lopez 2016). This emphasizes the fact that there is a rapid increase of the Latinx population in border states of the United States. The immigration status of Mexican American men influences the occurrence of IPV because of the stress that they experience in switching between two cultures, and the conflicts they experience identifying either with their Chicano culture or with the mainstream American culture (Ramos and Carlson 241). Males might feel pressured because of their unrealized ambition, their powerlessness, and the discrimination they face because of their immigration status. This shows that males are under extreme pressure because they have to work hard to find their place in society and feel accepted. So, it makes sense why they are so stressed, and when something is bothering them at home, a place where they want to be in control, they might feel that they need to use violence to reclaim control. Researchers Reina and Lohman explain that undocumented immigrants are at higher risk because of the stress of fearing deportation, which makes a woman more vulnerable to victimization because she has few alternatives to go elsewhere because her other family members may be in her home country. The fear of deportation is connected to Latinas' silencing because they are afraid that the authorities will exile them back to their home countries. Predators used "immigration-related abuse" to completely control their victims through intimidating, victimizing and isolating them, which leads to a small contact circle of women, which makes them more vulnerable to violent behavior (Reina and Lohman 480).

It is necessary to make the distinction between domestic violence and domestic abuse because they can occur together, and that is why they are often mixed up: sometimes only the abuse can happen or sometimes only the violence. "Domestic violence is violence committed by someone in the victim's domestic circle" (Rijksoverheid NL). People close to the victim have often included: family members, family friends, partners or ex-partners, or other relatives. "Domestic abuse includes any attempt by one person in an intimate relationship or marriage to dominate and control the other" (Smith and Segal 2019). Both forms are used to control the other, and it can happen to anyone; nonetheless, the victims are mostly female. It is essential to distinguish the difference between domestic violence and abuse because the

results can both be harmful, and many people underestimate the effect on the victim. For domestic violence, the results are mostly physical, and you can see the bruises from the outside. However, for domestic abuse, the results are not that clear because a victim does not have physical injury from “just words.” However, this emotional abuse can be as harmful as physical abuse because a lot of mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, originate from being psychologically terrorized (Bassuk, Dawson, Huntington 390). In Latin American communities, 1 in 3 Latinas will be exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) in her life (Casa de Esperanza 3), but not many dare to report it. The low rates of help-seeking and reporting might create the misconception that help is not necessary. Therefore, the reasons why women do not report domestic violence must be analyzed.

Domestic abuse starts with threats and psychological terrorizing of the other, and then it leads to violence. The results of psychological and emotional terror can be detrimental to a woman’s self-esteem, and it often leads to stress disorders and depression (Ceballo et al. 298). Sometimes it is hard for outsiders to see if the victim is abused; however, some signs show an abusive relationship, such as bruises, anxiousness to leave the house and be outside, and victims’ unwillingness to talk about their situation at home. Furthermore, the possible diseases mentioned above could be a reason for many victims not to leave the house or talk to anybody about it. The abusive behavior of the aggressor is used deliberately to gain control over the victim. There are many forms of emotional abuse: threats, humiliation, intimidation, dominance, and isolation (Both, Favaretto, and Freitas 3). All of these forms lead to insecurity in the victim, contributing to the underreporting of Latinas.

Domestic violence often includes a cycle of violence, which can start with the jealousy of a partner and the suspicion of treason, leading to psychosocial violence. This part includes threatening, oppression, victimization, and emotional abuse to show that the husband is in charge, and he is the boss over her. After that, the female expects that the abuse will happen again soon, and she knows what the risks are; leading to her submissive behavior towards her husband. The next phase includes physical violence to control his partner completely, and he will make sure that she is even more submissive the next time, and she will be dedicated to him even more, at least that is what he wants and what he expects of her. The next phase is also known as the honeymoon phase, where the husband will apologize many times, and he asks for forgiveness because when there are children involved, they are aware of the violent relationship. The husband tries to obliterate his children’s memory of his violence by also emotionally abusing them, by saying that what they saw has never happened. When the

woman does not show submissive behavior but instead shows disconnection to her partner, she knows that his violent behavior will continue. Furthermore, she might feel sorry for him because she empathizes with his situation; the possible stress he is facing, and she might forgive him because she hopes he will change, because after all, he apologized to her. For some of the domestic violence cases, it is at this stage that the reporting phase comes; however, it is not often that the female can do this. Once the husband finds out that his wife might or will talk to someone, the whole cycle starts again and when the husband feels like he is losing total control over his wife, the violence might become more severe and even result in femicide. Although this is extreme, it happens to four Latinas daily in the United States (Both, Favaretto, and Freitas 7).

Roberta Villalón, author of *Violence Against Latina Immigrants*, interviewed many Latinas who experienced domestic violence and who had enough courage to share their stories. One of them is Angela and she was in a violent relationship with Richie. After Angela and Richie had been married for four months, Angela found out that Richie had been cheating on her with another woman, and she confronted him with that, and he got angry and upset with her for even asking that, and then the cycle of violence started:

“He told me that he didn’t care anymore, that I was a stupid woman, and that if I didn’t believe what he was saying, he would end our relationship right then and there. He went to our bedroom, grabbed the marriage act, tore it into pieces, and threw it in the toilet and garbage bin in the bathroom, where I was crying. I thought I was going to die; I felt so bad and deceived. It was horrible, I felt like watching a sandcastle being destroyed all of a sudden. I thought it was all my fault, I believed that I was a failure. The following day, Richie continued with the fight. He was threatening me that he was going to leave me, and I told him to go ahead and do it. He got angry at my reaction, so he screamed and cursed at me. Then he threw the laundry basket and the garbage bin at me, which physically hurt me. They didn’t leave bruised when they hit me, but they wounded my heart. I felt so bad; I thought I was going to die” (Villalón 21-22).

This anecdote shows that in this cycle of violence, women are silenced because they might blame themselves that the abuse is all their fault. What is more, women might think that no one will believe them because the injury did not leave any physical scars behind.

Nevertheless, the violence did leave emotional damage, but this cannot be seen from the outside. After a while, Richie started to apologize to her and emotionally terrorizes her by

saying that she needs him because only he can take care of her children and she cannot leave him behind because no one else will take care of her and her family will see her as a failure. This terrorizing and self-blaming intimidates women not to report the abuse, which means that the husband can get away with the violence.

Researchers like Dietrich and Schuett have found that 33.9% of Latina women have reported that, at least once in their lifetime, they have been victims of domestic violence. Furthermore, almost half of all Latin American males and females have experienced some sort of domestic violence in their household (Ingram 166). It is crucial to distinguish the cultural factors contributing to domestic violence, and one of them is the *culture of honor*. This term is mostly used in the south of the United States, and “it can be identified in groups that place a great deal of importance on a social image in connection to family reputation” (Dietrich and Schuett 2). Violence is often used in these cultures because only in this way can strength and respect exist alongside each other, and an honorable family must maintain its reputation. Violence is also used when the honorable family reputation is at stake and one of the family members will disgrace the family image. This happens mostly in low socioeconomic status groups because they worry most about their public image: the negative effect of reporting domestic violence can lead to loss of their income, and maybe even their house (Dietrich and Schuett 2). People from high socioeconomic groups have less trouble with reporting the violence because their social image can be protected with their money, and they have enough to survive the consequences of the violence report. Female honor is referred to as *marianismo*², which teaches women to be self-sacrificing and to devote their lives to their family and be pure. *Machismo*, the male honor, includes the positive image of males being strong and courageous, and that they should be respected despite the fact that they could use violence to protect the family and create authority. Latinos who adhere to the honor culture are more likely to accept “honor-related IPV.” This is referred to when the abuse is jealousy-related that will affect the family honor (Vandello and Cohen 1001). When there is a case of honor related IPV, victims will be less likely to report this type of violence because they feel that they deserve it and because the violence is used for a good cause, and that is protecting the family image. Women often define themselves through their men, who dominate them throughout different phases of their lives (Ertürk 5). Furthermore, *machismo* is more related to the ideals of dominance than intimate partner violence because their culture teaches them specific ideals and rules that they should follow. Once a woman shows distinct

² Marianismo comes from beliefs about Mary, mother of Jesus, providing a supposed ideal of true femininity.

behaviors that threaten the existing gender roles, she might be harmed because her attitude could harm the honor culture. Antonio describes the macho behavior “as a caricature of masculinity, as men who take and abuse power without earning it by fulfilling their responsibilities” (Knapp, Muller, Quiros 9).

The stereotypical Chicana wife lives in a patriarchal society. In Latin culture, Chicanas are meant to be silent, passive, and only fulfill the role of mother and wife. Husbands are the breadwinners for the family and “many Chicanos have been historically invested in seeing men’s ‘control’ over the family as a byproduct of culture” (Russel y Rodríguez 105). Chicana spouses will take care of the household, children, and family that lives with them. “Chicanas who defy the Chicano patriarchal claim of the authentic and ‘good’ Chicana—passive and dedicated to the house and home—risk being denounced as acting white or being a *vendida*, a sell-out” (Russel y Rodríguez 105). Chicana girls are often manipulated into not wanting education or career. After all, their mothers and grandmothers did not have themselves because they took care of the household. In this way, the cultural expectations are forced upon young Latin American girls. Lana Reyes, a Chicana who has dealt with these expectations and thought out alternative means of education, shares a story about women’s “inevitable fate”:

“Women were not told to stand up for their rights... [they] were not told to go out and be educated and get a job. [In] fact every woman was getting beat on Friday and Saturday nights at their home. Everybody knew, nobody would talk about it, because they just accepted it as a norm. Even the big religious [men], their wives were getting their asses beat every so often by the preacher man/husband. Because first they are men and then they are whatever.... It was just accepted, but I don't think it is any more.... I think more and more women are coming up with education.” Lena Reyes (Russel y Rodríguez 107).

Lana Reyes was interviewed by Mónica Russel y Rodríguez because she wanted to show the rest of the world the “inescapable destiny” many Chicana women face trying to maintain their home culture in the United States. Russel y Rodríguez claims that the culturally constructed stereotype not only reflects their cultural identity; it also controls Chicana womanhood because, in this way, men were able to diminish women and leave them uneducated.

In Chicana womanhood, the “family becomes appropriated as the exclusive demarcation of ‘authentic’ and essentialized Chicana womanhood” (Russel y Rodríguez 104). Many factors distinguish whether a Latina woman is good or not. Certain stereotypes exist to categorize good Chicana women, and one of them is being submissive and exclusively dedicated to their husbands. These traditional gender roles can lead to an abusive relationship

because the woman does not have functions other than being a mother and taking care of the household. When Chicanas are being abused, they blame the abuse only on themselves and believe that they deserve what happens to them, classifying themselves as bad. All this leaves the abuser unharmed and women justify the abuse of their husbands. Mónica Russel y Rodríguez argues that the relationship between husband and wife is affected by domestic violence, but family relationships are also influenced by the abuse. She saw that the cultural roles of wife and mother constructed for these women limited their freedom, which is part of what is known as cultural freezing (Russel y Rodríguez 105). This means that women were only supposed to take care of the household because that is what culture expects them to do. Many people, especially Latin males, want to live by this term because it secures their position in society and leaves them invincible because women cannot do anything to lessen their husbands' power.

Jennifer Hirsch investigated the traditional gender roles that are internalized and picked up through everyday life issues, and children learn these early on. She made a clear distinction between the spatial differences used to describe the different roles between men and women. *La calle* (the street) is often seen as the place for men because men are able to leave the house freely because they are expected to be the breadwinner, and they do not need to ask permission to go outside because it is their place. However, on the contrary, the spatial place for females is *la casa* (the home). The home stands for “ordered and managed sexuality as opposed to the sexual danger and ferment of the street” (Hirsch 100). Women are supposed to be in the house all the time and make sure that everything inside of it is taken care of, which includes cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the children. Women cannot be seen on the streets alone; they need to be accompanied by their husbands or brothers, or when women are in a bigger group with other women. All of this leads to the concept of *respeto* (respect) because there is a hierarchical power structure where women need to be submissive to their significant other, and his wish is her command (Hirsch 101). When Mexicans immigrate to the United States, they often wish to protect these established gender roles; however, more often than not, women do have to work because their husbands' wages are not enough. Some men do not want to acknowledge this power shift and they will beat their wives because they are losing control over her (Knapp, Muller, Quiros 8). Knapp, Muller, Quiros interviewed Antonio, who is a second-generation immigrant, and he took on the role of the man in the house because that is what he had learned from his father. When Antonio was older, and he tried to embrace his “manliness” by trying to keep his wife inside the house and teaching his kids the same as he was taught. Antonio told that he was always feeling the pressure to do the

same things his father did, and he did not want his wife to leave the house. When he was asked if he was performing the same gender roles in the US as in Mexico, he responded:

“Yeah, in Mexico it’s like I’m the man and the power and that’s it ya know. I’m gonna do this and that but you don’t have no opinion. You’re just right here at home so you can cook take care of the kids and that’s it. Here it’s totally different. Now I think different that we’re equal me and her.” (Knapp, Muller, Quiros 9).

He must understand the fact that in the United States, men and women are taught to be equal, and Antonio eventually knows that he can no longer control his wife like he would do in Mexico and live up to his father’s expectation. Fortunately, this situation turned out for the best, as his wife did take a job, and they are both providing for their family.

Not only are some husbands trying to enforce the traditional gender roles on Latin American women, but also some grandmothers are trying to force the younger women to behave in a certain way, which is described as being a good Chicana woman. When domestic violence takes place in a household, some friends may try to persuade the victim to leave; however, the grandmother or other family members will tell her “not to overstep her bounds as a woman and to stay with him even though he abused her” (Knapp, Muller, Quiros 8). Carmen Velasco is a Chicana woman who had to cope with her violent boyfriend because her family told her not to leave the abusive relationship because it would destroy the order in the family. However, Carmen was the provider for the family because her boyfriend Pablo was unemployed, and she tells the things that had happened to her:

“...And [Pablo] started beating me up at his mom's house. And his mom was just like my mom. ‘Women get beat up all the time, Carmen. Just put up with it. You have to accept it.’

I was like, ‘Okay, okay,’ and I played along with it. But one time he beat me twice in a row. We were looking at a house and we had it in escrow and [we] were about to close on it the next day. And that day he grabbed me and beat me up. And I said, ‘Look, we cannot live like this. We cannot buy a house, Pablo.’” Carmen Velasco (Russel y Rodríguez 113)

Carmen was one of the more fortunate Latinas because she was able to support herself, and after enduring much violence, she was able to finally escape her toxic relation because she had enough money to support herself and her children. However, hers and Pablo’s family did not agree with her decision, especially because Carmen was now harming both families’

reputation, and Pablo could not financially support himself, so he had to live with his family again.

Chapter 2: The Effective Silencing of Latinas

It is essential to understand why many Latinas, who are victims of domestic violence, do not report their abuse. In Latinx communities, children, adolescents, and adults do not learn about these reasons. They do not read about this in school because not many books, articles, or stories are available on this topic. However, some Latinx writers have decided to write about it because they feel that people must understand the reasons for the abuse and the fact that it is too rarely reported. Not all Latinx writers were appreciated and honored for the value of their contribution to the domestic violence debate among Latin American women. This is partial because non-academic books were written, which included controversial content, and people without higher education would be not able to read it. The books would form a threat to disrupt the peace and demonstrate against Latinas' ongoing oppression in American society. Nevertheless, some non-academic books were appreciated because it gave the domestic violence victims a voice even though the context was contentious.

The novel *The House on Mango Street* was censored and was threatened to be destroyed by the Arizona state legislature because of its context: sexual harassment, domestic violence, and racism, amongst others. It also received much criticism, and because of the delicate subjects, schools attempted to ban the book and exclude it from curriculums. The House Bill 2281 tried to disassemble this controversial book, which was passed by the Arizona legislature. "HB 2281 prohibits a school district or charter school from including courses or classes that either promote the overthrow of the United States government or promote resentment toward a race or class of people" (House of Representatives 2010). This book did not want to overthrow the US government, but it did want to promote resentment. The book includes feminism, poverty, and the traditional gender roles that exist within a Latinx family. It is a controversial book because, on the one hand, it talks about mature topics and emphasizes the subordination of women. However, on the other hand, the book is a coming-of-age story that is also meant for young people because it is written in relatively simple English. People want to dismiss *The House on Mango Street* as children's literature because of the controversial context, the maltreatment of girls and women, and the constant circle of violence that they are in (Field 54).

Nonetheless, with this book being written in English, non-English Latinas cannot understand the story, and it will not be sufficient for them because they are unable to read it and see that there is hope for them. This book informed many people about the violent relationships in Latinx communities and gave Latinas a voice (Milan 2016). The book starts

with the quote “A las Mujeres” ---"To the women" which emphasizes the importance of women for whom it is written.

Another book that gave women a voice and informed broader audiences was *Borderlands/La Frontera*, another essential book for Chicana literature like *The House on Mango Street*. Both books deal with the same issues as gender inequalities, race, identity, and the American mainstream versus the Latino culture. Latinx people feel that they do not belong to their ethnic culture and are discriminated by the American mainstream. Furthermore, *Borderlands* also refers to the geographical border between the United States and Mexico. The importance of the multidimensional perspective, also known as codeswitching, is that the reader sees the story from different points of view, and the reader is not forced with one opinion, but multiple people bring their own piece to the conversation, such as different professors and scholars. Even though this publication was banned by the Arizona House bill 2281 because the story is filled with indignation, it is still recommended by many scholars who assign it to their students, and many people praised this book for its content. These two stories, *The House on Mango Street* and *Borderlands/ La Frontera* are good examples of the reasons for this oppression, why women are abused, and why they do not report the violence against them due to the fear of their husbands and the fact that often these women do not have anywhere to go.

Roberta Villalón argues that one of the main arguments that immigrants become undocumented is because of their violent and abusive relationship. Women decide to remain in the relationship as their primary survival strategy (Villalón 7). When Villalón was talking to Angela, a survivor of domestic violence, it was imperative for Angela to know that everything she shared would remain confidential. Villalón claims that immigrants who faced with violence are often resistant towards trusting someone, and once a woman comes forward, to tell the truth, the first response from that person is extremely important for the victim because that will let her know if she is believed and if that person is willing to help the victim. Furthermore, Angela thought that she was to blame for what happened and at the same time, “their (battered immigrants) feelings of despondency are intensified because they are unaware of or most probably have been given a distorted version of their rights as undocumented foreigners” (Villalón 18). However, once there is hope for these battered women, they will “break free” from their violent past and once they see hope, they will be more likely to report the violation. “A woman’s capacity to survive violence depends on a community of sympathetic listeners” (Rudrappa 39). This emphasizes that victims are cautious about sharing their stories with others because they fear that they are not believed. Furthermore,

undocumented immigrants are often unaware of the fact that some laws and rules protect them against abuse and victimization, as discussed later on. Undocumented immigrants think that their chances of staying in the United States decrease once they report the abuse. Predators use the legal/illegal status of their victims to blackmail them so that they will not report the violence to the authorities. The deportation threats make victims rely entirely on their abusers because he can give them security and a roof over their heads, which they will not have once they report the violent crimes (Reina and Lohman 484). The U Visa grants protection for abused women, and they are allowed to tell their stories without being deported. However, the government is allowed to charge the women with a large amount of money when she wants to apply for citizenship, which she cannot pay because she is economically dependent on her husband, which is another barrier for not reporting (Menjívar and Salcido 912).

The socioeconomic status of Latina women is a critical factor in reporting domestic violence. Latina immigrants tend to have lower levels of education and rely financially on their husbands. This all leads to the fact that there is a small chance for upward mobility for a woman (Reina and Lohman 485). When immigrants arrive at a new place, they already have a disadvantage because they have to find a new job and, most of the time, they have to learn a new language and build a new network. This can be extremely challenging for Latinas, who had a low level of education, which gives the husbands more power and control because he will be the financial provider. Abusers use women's lack of knowledge by threatening and bullying women who do stand little chance of resistance because of their low education, the language barrier, and the lack of resources. For women to overcome the *machista* culture, they need to abandon traditional gender roles, which might lead to violence in the short run. However, when women are strong enough and have the socioeconomic means to leave their husbands, they can start new and safer lives for themselves and their children (Ertürk 6). Mónica Russel y Rodríguez writes about the story of Angie Virgil, who wanted to be more than a housewife, so she tried to take classes for her to be a provider of the family as well. Angie challenged her husband Mario by telling him that his ideas were not realistic anymore. In the United States, women have to work to make a living because it is not possible to live only on one income. Gender equality in the United States conflicts with the traditional Mexican gender roles (Kim and Montano 571). After Mario heard this, he wanted to reclaim control again, and the cycle of violence started again, which emphasized Angie's roles of womanhood:

“He was being abusive physically, sexually, and emotionally.... He blamed me for all our problems saying that I was using school as an excuse, that I just

wasn't being responsible.... He assumed that [taking care of the children] was my duty. [After all], what else was I going to do?" Angie Vigil (Russel y Rodríguez 109).

The fact that Mario was holding back Angie's capacities made it look as though she was incapable of doing anything and she was only good at was taking care of children and the house. Due to their violent relationship, Mario was able to live on his normal life while making sure that Angie would not get too many responsibilities.

Nowadays, in the United States, it is normal for Latin Americans to work. It does not matter what type of education they have had; women are willing to work and change for the better because it will lead to more modernity. However, the domestic sector's stereotypical jobs are often the only one Latinas can get hired in, and sometimes this leads to women staying at home with their children, which will enforce the traditional roles. "In the event that they do get a job, gender relations might begin to shift, as women no longer have to respect, tolerate, or even stay with husbands who spend money on vices and do not treat them with compassion" (Knapp, Muller, Quiros 7). When women return to their home country, which, in Angelica's case, is Mexico, they find out that the wages in the United States are better than at home. Angelica shares her story to Knapp, Muller, and Quiros: "I went back to Mexico for a year, but it was awful because I was making \$80 at a shoe factory every 15 days and I could make that in three days in the United States." The fact that women can work does not make them feel empowered, instead, it seems more degrading. However, talking to women who live in the United States, close to the Mexican border, argue that it does not matter. They are happy doing it because it gives them more freedom and economic independence.

In Villalón's book, Angela was fired and lost her job, which was devastating for her, but also for her family because she had to send money to her family in Mexico to support them.

With the fear of deportation shaping all social and economic interactions, many undocumented immigrants, not surprisingly, accept what employers offer, no questions asked, and working long hours for low wages and few benefits.

Understanding that undocumented immigrants enjoy little in the way of actual legal protections and deeply fear deportation, many employers cannot resist the temptation to exploit them. The making of demands by undocumented immigrants on employers means loss of a job. Laws other than the immigration laws also contribute to the exploitation of undocumented immigrants (Villalón 24).

This piece is influential because it shows that immigrants are more often than not exploited by their employers if they do not work hard enough. Once Richie, Angela's husband, told her

boss that he should fire her, and she actually lost her job, and Richie then blamed her that there was not any money to buy food, and he abused her even more. Furthermore, Richie's behavior might be categorized as "internalized racism because they have learned to despise all things Mexican" (Villalón 31) because of all the injustice done to Latinx communities. They despise mostly their cultural and economic heritage because that is what has brought them in this adverse situation where they are being discriminated against. This shows that being an undocumented immigrant can work against you, and the work that immigrants do is often underpaid. Furthermore, Latinas are more vulnerable to mental health diseases, such as depression and anxiety, because they endure all kinds of stress, such as poverty, low education, and discrimination (Ramos and Carlson 244). All of these factors make women less likely to report because they are entirely dependent on their husbands. After all, they believe that he will take care of them despite the violence that might come with it.

It is interesting to see an increasing number of women seeking help when there are children involved (Sabrina and Lannen 101). For many women, the health and well-being of their children is their primary concern. The National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence (NatSCEV) reports that in 2008, 6.2% of children in the general population aged between 0-17 have witnessed the abusive relationship between their parents. Nevertheless, this number is even higher when the kids are older and within Latin communities. The estimated percentage is 24.6, with children between the age of 14-17 (Ogbonnaya, Finno-Velasquez, Kohl 197-198). This suggests that children with negative upbringing are at considerable risk of developing behavioral and mental problems. Many Latinas who were able to report the violence abuse were influenced by their children because they did not want them to grow up in a violent environment. To put it differently, they want a better future for their children and were willing to do anything they can to make this possible. Esperanza is one of the women in the article of Silva-Martínez that was not afraid to share her story:

"If it wasn't for my children, I don't know where I would be right now because my children were the ones who made me react, when I was in those most difficult moments . . . They were little, they were the ones that comforted me, they (would say) 'Mommy, don't cry.' I think the youngest one gave me a lot of encouragement" (Esperanza, Silva-Martínez 452).

Furthermore, looking at the cultural norms within Latino society, motherhood is essential for women, and their primary goal in life is to take care of their children. In the book of Villalón, Angela does not want to leave her husband at first because she is ashamed of his behavior and is afraid that he will hurt her kids. When her kids asked her to leave Richie, she told them to

be patient because it was a slow process, so nobody would get hurt. It was only when her sons begged her to leave the relationship that she realized how unhealthy the relationship was because Angela thought that the relationship was only hurting her and not her sons. When she became aware of the fact that her children were suffering too, and she was determined to leave (Villalón 20). What is more, women often think they need a father figure for their children, which is why they stay too long in a violent relationship. However, when the violence harms the children, women decide to tell their families and if they have enough courage, they will tell the police about the abusive relationship. Depression and past victimization were important factors for Latina women not to report their husbands' violence because they had less faith in social services and police. They believe that the available services have failed to help them before, so they will not likely help them this time. Their childhood experiences will impact their further behavior, even more, when the background was harmful to their self-esteem and health (Sabrina and Lannon 101).

Researchers like Reina, Maldonado, and Lohman investigated the reasons why women do not report the violence. When immigrants move into a specific area in the United States, they will carry their own culture and background with them, and when families move into a particular neighborhood, they will live by the rules they know from home. However, when Latin families move into a community where the culture is already established, they will have to adapt to a new cultural and social area with an unfamiliar context, new practices, languages, and faces, which makes it challenging to connect and build a new support system (Reina, Maldonado, Lohman 1476). Research has found that weaker women with almost no social networks experience a higher rate of domestic violence (Ferguson 230). On top of that comes social isolation because of the husband incarcerating his own wife in his house. Social isolation can be a result of the language barrier. However, IPV not only happens for married couples but also for young boys and girls in a relationship. They have learned from a young age that domestic violence is seen as "normal" and a method that leads to the subordination of women, and they are more likely to turn out like their parents, and the abuse may continue in their generation as well (Cummings, Gonzalez-Guarda, Sandoval 160).

What is more, victims did not have enough knowledge of the laws that would protect them, making it less likely for them to report domestic violence. This unawareness makes Latina women extremely vulnerable to domestic violence because their husband tells them that they have nowhere to go and no laws will protect them. Women often do not have the resources and materials to look for the laws and organizations to protect them. This reason

will be discussed more elaborately in the next chapter because that will give more information about the organizations and the laws that can protect women against domestic violence.

Chapter 3: Some People are More Important Than Others and Should Obtain Different Remedies Than Others

As mentioned before, Mexican American women's choices for reporting domestic violence are limited by their husbands in several ways. Cultural, political and economic factors are influencing Latinas' reporting rate. Because they face many challenges, it is impeditive that more support networks are established that could break the silence about violence. Most of the time, in American society, there are two options for Latinas: private and charitable help versus public and legal services. First of all, what is essential for Latinas is to know that they are not alone in this struggle, people are willing to help them. However, it becomes more difficult for them to report it because they feel obligated to remain loyal to their husbands no matter the circumstances. Charitable organizations are established, but their impact remains insufficient because they do not adequately address the problem, only parts of it. Legal institutions often promise women freedom, but in reality, they often fail to do so, which will be discussed later on in this chapter.

An essential factor in reporting domestic violence and liberation from it, is Latina women sharing their stories with other women. When women listen to each other's stories, it could help them understand other realities and identities, making them aware that they are not alone. The difference between Latinas knowing about the violence and a broader society recognizing the violence is that the broader community outnumbers the victims. If a more substantial audience knows about the problem, together they might be able to achieve alternatives for battered women (Silva-Martínez 453). Women often encouraged each other to speak up, and they supported each other because they had all been through the same horrible experience. When Latinas share their experiences, they show that they are vulnerable people and other victims can try to imagine a life without abuse. Several campaigns have been attempting to raise women's voices in the process of being able to report domestic violence; however, not enough money has been raised in order for these campaigns to be effective. The phrase "*sí, se puede*" has been hugely influential because Latinas shared their IPV stories with other women and showed victims that it is acceptable to speak up to lose any fear they have.

"I want them to know, I want them to not be afraid and get out of that situation. And what I tell them is, 'if I did it, you (can) too.' . . . That it can be done. We are made stronger than they are, we have children and we have to get ahead" (Silva-Martínez 454).

Nevertheless, private campaigns always rely on donors and non-profit organizations, and this decreases their successes. It is hard for them to raise awareness because not many wealthy Americans are willing to spend their tax money on immigrants. However, some non-profit organizations are available for battered immigrants, but most of the time, these organizations are not known to women and they have not been as useful as they could have been. Furthermore, these organizations are dependent on charities who are willing to donate money. The National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence, also known as Alianza, wants to create awareness and understanding towards Latin American women for domestic violence and the organization provides a bilingual program, which is useful for many women, since not all of them speak English. The program tries to create an equal workplace for battered women, which could secure their economic empowerment. Carol Baldwin Moody, who is the president of this organization, explains her wishes by saying this: “Embracing diversity and empowering women is essential to the work of achieving gender equality” (Alianza 2020). The organizers acknowledge that much needs to be done for things to change, but they explain that they have had much help from other organizations, such as Women’s Economic Self-Sufficiency Teams, which helped with developing a financial plan (Alianza 2010). The organization is entirely dependent on money from charities, and without donations, this organization is not likely to survive on its own.

Not only private and non-profit organizations are helping Latina victims of domestic violence. Legal help is also offered; however, it is proven that legal organizations discriminate and are not as helpful as they should be. Two laws can protect Latinas: The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (VTVPA). Nevertheless, these laws are not always equitable, and they facilitate unevenly.

“The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) is a landmark piece of legislation that sought to improve criminal justice and community-based responses to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking in the United States” (National Domestic Violence Hotline 2020). This act helped many victims of domestic violence who used to suffer in silence. However, this act is not known to everyone, and most of the time, women are incarcerated in their own homes, which makes them unable to report because they are controlled 24/7. The VAWA programs that are conducted by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services have increased the report rates for domestic violence at different levels of society. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services have listed a few

pathways for women who deal with domestic violence under the VAWA act and can become U.S. citizens permanently.

[The VAWA] allows documented and undocumented immigrant spouses of residents or citizens to apply for residency and become citizens without the sponsorship of their abusive spouses. To do so, an immigrant survivor must prove that she, or he, (1) was married to a U.S. citizen or a legal permanent resident, (2) was married in good faith, (3) resided together as wife and husband, (4) was subject to domestic violence and/or extreme cruelty during the marriage in the United States, and (5) is a person of good moral character (which means that she or he does not have a criminal background) (Villalón 35).

Once the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) acknowledges that the victim is in danger, they will grant her legal citizenship for a year, and if she is behaving well, it could be yearly renewable (Villa-Nicholas and Sweeney 2019). However, these reasons all require someone in your family to already be a U.S. citizen, which is not often the case for immigrant Latina women. For the VAWA acts, self-petitions are extremely important because the goal of the ORA (Organization for Refugees of America/ Organización para Refugiados de América) brochures is “to show immigration officers that the applicant is indeed a survivor of violence, and her story in her ‘own words’ makes ‘all the difference’ in her case” (Villalón 18). It is beneficial for the VAWA that women write about the events that have happened to them, even though they know that this could be a painful experience for them because most women have expelled these thoughts and sometimes it is hard for them to remember what exactly has happened. Villalón argues that VAWA standards are outrageous for helping women and she illustrates that by telling Claudia’s story. Claudia has been through a horrible and scary situation; she has been hit, harmed with sharp objects, and above all, threatened with death. When the counselor asked her if she has called the police, she answered by saying that she feared deportation and that the police hasn’t helped her before. Nevertheless, although Claudia and her child’s life were in danger, she was not eligible for ORA. They told her: “The next time something happens, make sure to call the police” (Villalón 43). This, by all means, is ineffectual because there may not be the next time for Claudia because she could be killed. The VAWA should provide Claudia a support network that could break the silence of violence; however, the act constricts her choices like before and she does not have any other options.

The VTVPA “is a federal statute passed by the US Congress in 2000 to reauthorize certain Federal programs to prevent violence against immigrant women and children” (U.S. Legal

2020). When applying for citizenship, it is imperative for the VAWA that the women are married to a US citizen, however “if the battered immigrant was married to an undocumented immigrant, or was separated but not divorced from a previous spouse while engaged in the abusive relationship, she can apply for a U visa through the VTVPA” (Villalón 35). The VTVPA can grant a visa to undocumented immigrants, without US family members, whose lives are in danger. This act is vital for immigrant women who suffer domestic violence because “the costs associated with the filing, issuance, registration, or service of a warrant, protection order, petition for a protection order, or witness subpoena order, whether issued inside or outside the State, tribal, or local jurisdiction” (Public Law 1494) will not have to be paid by the victim. This is beneficial for Latina women because often their husbands control the economic means and, if she does not have to bear the costs for filing a complaint, it is more likely for her to do it. Moreover, the police ask battered women to participate in an investigation against their predator; however, if the police think the victim was useless, she will not be able to apply for a U visa. For many reasons, this is problematic because victims are already afraid of being deported by reporting it to the police, and the victims are too scared to accuse the aggressor. Although the VTVPA is supposed to provide safety for victims, it fails to do so because Latinas are too afraid to undertake action against their husbands.

Furthermore, although Villalón argues that although these laws should protect the rights of every person, no matter race, sexuality, class, ethnicity or religion, it still fails to do so because of discriminatory factors. For example, wealthy taxpayers wanting to reaffirm its sovereignty by “reclaiming” their city, and the state’s productivity of the rich people because the poor people are not productive enough. She claims that the VAWA and VTVPA lead to the inclusion and exclusion of specific persons, increasing inequality instead of decreasing it. She concludes that these acts “legitimize battered immigrants in their particular victimization and provide them with services conducive to breaking free from abusive relationships and becoming legally and economically autonomous U.S. citizens” (Villalón 2).

Villalón also has also specifically investigated the ORA. This organization was active from 2000 to 2008 and was the only organization in Texas that allowed battered women to get the help that was free of charges for those who earned up to 125 percent of the defined poverty line (Villalón 3). The fact that the organization was in Texas near the Mexican border was beneficial because many immigrants are situated in Texas, and women were aware of this association. The following piece from Angela’s story shows how hard it was for her to

remember the battering events and her reason for waiting to report her husband's violent behavior:

“I tried to include as many things as I could in this affidavit about my past, but unfortunately there were so many bad things that happened, that my chest aches from remembering. I only wanted to have a family for my sons. I wanted my sons to have the support of a man. I wanted to be respected. I had fallen in love with Richie and I was blind to his mistreatment. I thought it was my entire fault” (Villalón 19).

After many more violent accidents, Angela was able to seek help and she called the ORA because she needed more information to escape the violent relationship and she wanted a better future for her and her family. She made every effort to ‘*salir adelante*’ (to move on and move forward) (Villalón 34). The ORA accepted her case under the VAWA and she was able to apply for US citizenship because of her own self-petitioning and because of the danger she was in. Her final words spoke to many people and helped many to report domestic violence: “Sometimes, one is like in a pause; it takes something for the outside world to make you react” (Villalón 34). Angela's case had a fortunate ending; however, not all Latina immigrants who come to ORA are as lucky as Angela. Since 9/11, ORA argues that it has become an inclusive organization that provides services to all ethnicities, no matter their religious, political background, and language. This allowed many women to come to ORA for help and it became a safe haven for many immigrants. “ORA developed from a politically radical, volunteer-based grassroots legal group into a politically moderate employee-based nonprofit legal organization” (Villalón 4). However, this is what ORA itself believes, Villalón found that this organization showed inconsistencies with whom they let apply for US citizenship: they chose “men over women, married over nonmarried, heterosexual over nonheterosexual, American over foreign, and working, middle or upper class over poor” (Villalón 41).

Conclusion: The Underreporting of Domestic Violence

It is important to acknowledge that more awareness must be created about domestic violence in Latinx communities for things to change. To understand the extent to which domestic violence among Mexican American women is constraining their choices, it is essential to highlight that Latinas often do not even have a choice in the first place because their husbands take away their freedom by isolating them from society. Latinas do not want to report domestic violence, which limits their options, because they have family traditions to uphold in and outside of the family, and they have learned not to be the burden of their family and not to disgrace the family honor. Latinas also depend on their husband financially because women are not expected to work outside the house. Latinas face many challenges if they want to report domestic violence because of many reasons. One of them is the language barrier, making it impossible for women to communicate their struggles and fears with other people. Furthermore, many shelters that want to help women do not have Spanish-speaking employees, which makes helping victims nearly impossible if they only speak Spanish. Another reason is that when women have children, they often do not want to endanger their children by involving them. However, if she is not engaging them, her husband could harm the children, or take them away. Moreover, for victims, legal or illegal immigrant's citizenship matters. Females who are illegal in the US are less likely to report domestic violence because of the chance of being deported. Providing support networks could break the silence about violence because women can learn from other battered women, and together, they can achieve freedom by talking to each other and learning that they do not need to feel ashamed. An extreme case of silencing women is femicide, which happens more in Latin American countries than in the United States; however, it is an occurring problem, which is unknown to many people. Laws can protect Latinas from domestic violence; however, the legal organizations that should provide safety to victims are often biased and not able to help everybody, and it is hard to prove if the woman was a victim of domestic violence. There are many rules in order for women to qualify for asylum or to obtain help. Nonetheless, by consciously talking about domestic violence in Latinx communities, Americans can develop a deeper understanding of this topic, which is crucial to pay more attention to minorities who desperately need help.

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