

# ¡Ayúdame!: Latina Immigrants, Intimate-Partner Violence, and Barriers to Help- Seeking

By Delfina Martinez-Pandiani  
WGS 1253: Sexual Health and Reproductive  
Justice, Prof. Madina Agénor  
Harvard College  
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## Introduction

When discussing intimate-partner violence [IPV] research in the United States, two important patterns have to be noted. First, this literature has been mostly focused on white nonimmigrant women.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the failure of law enforcement officials to respond appropriately to violence against women has received harsh criticism -- and the emerging debate around appropriate mechanisms to fix this generally have focused on women as a monolithic class with similar patterns of conduct and common concerns.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these two patterns, the different experiences and realities of women of color in general, and Latina immigrant women in particular, have not been thoroughly taken into consideration in the process of designing effective guidelines on enforcement in domestic violence situations. In this sense, it is imperative to analyze the existing literature on groups of women caught in the intersection of multiple systems of power -- such as gender, race, class, and immigration status, among others. Latina immigrant women who face domestic violence in the United States compose one of these groups. This paper is guided by the research question of determining the barriers and factors that influence the help-seeking behaviors of Latina immigrant women when they are faced with IPV. A review of the existing literature on this topic will lead to a more appropriate lens with which to frame future interventions and services that ought to cater adequately and effectively to the needs of Latinas. This analysis ultimately exposes that the studied group faces multiple and intertwining barriers to help-seeking in instances of IPV that could be described in three levels: cultural, situational/structural and institutional.

## Cultural Factors and Barriers

Before analyzing cultural factors that might affect the help-seeking behaviors of Latina immigrants, it is important to note that an overemphasis of the role of culture in perpetuating violence in different racial or ethnic groups can lead to a mistaken view of a group's cultural values as pathological. This is not the aim of this part of the review. Research on IPV within minority groups must not focus solely on victims, perpetrators, communities, or cultures; rather, it must be viewed within the political, historical, and economic context in which domestic violence takes place.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the discussion of cultural factors and barriers in this paper is complemented by a subsequent discussion of other severely influential structural and institutional barriers to help-seeking.

## Marriage and Family: Marianism, Machismo, and Familism

In 1994, Rivera noted that "the Latino patriarchy denies Latinas individuality on the basis of gender" by encouraging definitions of Latinas as dependent upon status within a family unit structure -- their identities defined by their roles as mothers and wives.<sup>4</sup> The influence of the cultural conception of marriage and family in help-seeking behaviors was present in almost all the studies and sources analyzed in this paper. In a study of Mexican immigrant women that had experienced IPV in the Southwestern U.S., Fuchsel et al. found that usually the women's fathers were the ones who told them about their role as a wife and what marriage entailed, as opposed to gathering this information from their mothers. This parental influence led to a sense of obligation to remain married despite any circumstances, including incidences of domestic violence.<sup>5</sup> The Latina immigrant women's conceptualization of marriage is thus different from other groups', as some of them envision domestic violence as a natural part of marriage.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of *marianism* further reinforces this conceptualization of Latinas' identities as wives and mothers. This idea, rooted in Catholicism, refers to the mother of Jesus (the Virgin Mary), and signifies women's experiences with the concept of submissiveness and self-sacrifice in relationships. Women are expected to maintain their loyalty to their family structure, and sometimes enduring physical abuse is a way of demonstrating their loyalty.<sup>7</sup> Fuchsel et al.'s study participants agreed that *marianism* was related to their situation and "believed that being submissive was part of her role as wife and mother."<sup>8</sup> This

strong conviction might act as an impediment from seeking services and help when faced with IPV. Further, Catholicism's dogma that marriage happens once in life leads many women to believe that "they must forgive what they cannot leave or change," and that violence accounts as an "unchangeable circumstance designed by God as a challenge to be met with dignity in order to enter heaven after death."<sup>9</sup>

Cultural conceptions of women's role in the family and a marriage are further influenced by the concepts of *machismo* and *familism*. In Fuchsel's study, "most women identified their husbands as being macho," defined by the women as being "dominant, superior, and strong in relationships."<sup>10</sup> Other studies have found a correlation between greater tolerance of *machismo* and lower rates of help-seeking among Latina immigrants.<sup>11</sup> This is inextricably related to *familism*: a strong identification and attachment of individuals to their nuclear and extended families that leads to the idea that family needs and cohesion ought to be put over individual needs.<sup>12</sup> Many times, Latina women have to choose between maintaining the valued marriage unit and seeking help. The high value placed on marriage and family leads many Latina immigrant women who are faced with IPV to not to seek help out of shame or embarrassment.

#### Shame, Embarrassment and Cultural Isolation

The focus placed on Latinas' resilience for the stability of the family unit can lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment that reduce the odds of seeking any sort of help and can lead to isolation. A commonly referenced idea in Latino communities that "*la ropa sucia se lava en casa*" ("dirty clothes are washed at home") leads many Latina victims to maintain their intimate relationship issues "isolated from outside influences," in order to avoid the possibility of embarrassment.<sup>13</sup> All Latina victims in Fuchsel's study faced difficulty disclosing information about their abuse to their immediate family members: they felt "embarrassed, unsupported and as if they had failed in their committed relationships."<sup>14</sup> In Reina's study, 40% of the participants indicated that shame or embarrassment were strong factors that prevented them from seeking domestic violence services, and that these feelings were reinforced by close friends' and family members' behaviors.<sup>15</sup> The situation is even worse for Latina immigrants who migrated to the United States alone. Even if the feelings of shame are absent, many Latinas lack a supportive family network because many of them are in this country without their extended families.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, Latina immigrants faced with IPV find themselves in cultural isolation: many of them don't have family members to contact for help, and many of the ones that do run the risk of being ostracized by friends or family for seemingly betraying their intimate partner and the family unit.<sup>17</sup> This feeling of cultural isolation is a major factor keeping Latina immigrant victims from seeking interventions or community resources.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Structural and Situational Factors and Barriers**

##### Structural Isolation: Economics, Education, Transportation, English Proficiency

Structural factors that create situational isolation greatly exacerbate the cultural isolation previously discussed, which greatly prevents Latina victims from seeking help. One of these factors is female economic inequality. The cycle of domestic violence is maintained to a large degree by economic structures that disenpower women, as they many times lead to economic dependence on the women's abusers. For instance, women in families with incomes below \$10,000 per year are more likely than other women to be violently attacked by an intimate.<sup>19</sup> In this light, the low socioeconomic status of Latina immigrants becomes "in and of itself, a barrier to acquiring assistance and relief" since most immigrant Latinas face low-paying jobs and work in semi-skilled occupations.<sup>20</sup> The economic difficulties reported by victims inevitably interfere with their ability to access and secure the resources that they need to exit abusive relationships. This intersection of class, national origin and gender leads to multiple barriers to help-seeking.

Further, low levels of educational attainment among immigrant women who face IPV function to maintain their economic dependence on their abusers, and to decrease their likelihood of learning about potential help. In the U.S., Latinos have the "lowest educational attainment rates and income when compared to other ethnic groups."<sup>21</sup> This lack of education increases many Latinas' vulnerability to IPV: they have fewer skills with which to become independent after leaving their abusers, and they are less knowledgeable about their rights.<sup>22</sup> A study based on a sample of 568 immigrant Latina women collected over a 6-year period found that education was one of the most significant predictors of whether or not a report was made to police.<sup>23</sup>

The isolation that emerges from structural factors such as economic inequality and low educational attainment is many times aggravated by a lack of access to reliable transportation.

Many Latina immigrants lack a driver's license or access to transportation, and consequently become even more dependent on their abusive partner. Most participants in Reina's 2014 study had experienced that "social interaction outside the home was limited, most of the time nonexistent," mainly from not having access to transportation, not working for pay, not having any social networks, and lacking resources.<sup>24</sup> This structural barrier to help-seeking is even more significant for those victims that endure an additional intersecting obstacle: living in rural areas. Latinas in these areas are placed in conditions of isolation and poverty by "the lack of political and economic advocacy that characterizes rural settings."<sup>25</sup> Those victims who reside in rural areas and lack independent access to a car are in an even more vulnerable position, as there seems to be a "lack of means for informing immigrant women in rural areas about antiviolence services."<sup>26</sup> In this sense, those Latina immigrants who are living in rural areas face additional barriers when they try to seek help if they are faced with intimate partner abuse.

Another factor to be considered in the structural limitations that Latina immigrant victims face when seeking help stems from a lack of language proficiency. Many immigrants are not proficient in English -- or speak English at all -- and this creates a barrier in their interaction with potential help and service providers. For instance, many times when Latinas overcome many other barriers to finally enter shelters, many are turned away because of their lack of language proficiency.<sup>27</sup> Latina's access to advocacy programs and shelters is thus greatly limited by the lack of bilingual and bicultural personnel in many shelters and other service providers.

### **Institutional Factors and Barriers**

#### **Interactions with Law Enforcement**

Language barriers not only situate Latina immigrant victims in situational isolation that prevents them from reaching community programs and shelters, but it also embodies an *institutional* barrier when it comes to interacting with the law. Law enforcement and other representatives of the legal system "lack adequate training and language capacity to respond effectively to victims who are immigrants," and many times they disregard the dynamics of race when it comes to the assistance immigrant victims need.<sup>28</sup> As Pitts wisely notes, "the desired effects and actual results of reporting to the police are not always the same."<sup>29</sup> Other scholars also note that law enforcement has a

history of sexism and of downplaying domestic violence, which in the case of Latina immigrants is coupled to racism and classism -- making it more difficult for the Latina women to obtain the help they need.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, Latinas face additional racial and ethnic barriers: while white women victims don't receive discriminatory treatment on account of their race, Latinas are dehumanized when they seek help, as they have "no connection to those who have been assigned to prosecute and adjudicate their complaints."<sup>31</sup> For instance, police officers that are dispatched to IPV calls in Latin American or immigrant neighborhoods frequently only speak English. As with shelters, there is a shortage of bilingual and bicultural personnel, which "creates a system unprepared to address claims by Latinas."<sup>32</sup> Thus, Latina immigrants have to overcome a number of obstacles in order to utilize the criminal justice system to gain protection and justice.

It is important to note here that this interaction of Latina immigrant victims with the police might be further complicated by a general mistrust of authority based upon previous negative experiences with law enforcement, both in their native countries and in the U.S. Many times, victims feel intimidated by law enforcement and have trouble trusting legal experts "due to bad experiences with law enforcement in their home countries," making it difficult to access avenues for safety available in the U.S.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the history of Latinos in the U.S. in interaction with local police and federal law enforcement agencies "is marked by abuse and violence suffered by the Latino community at the hands of officers," and thus many Latina victims become suspicious of police who have acted in a violent or repressive manner toward their community at large.<sup>34</sup> Because of the problematic history, a Latina may also be further ostracized by her community if she decides to reach out to the legal system that is already considered oppressive by her community. Once again, Pitts knowingly notes that, in the case of Latina immigrants facing IPV, as opposed to providing protection, "police intervention... in fact, may exacerbate the abuse that immigrant women suffer."<sup>35</sup>

#### **Undocumented Status**

Perhaps the most prominent institutional barrier to accessing help and services when experiencing partner abuse for many Latina immigrants is their undocumented legal status in the U.S. For those victims that are undocumented, their general fear of deportation and their abusers' threat of deportation serve as significant barriers to help-seeking. Multiple

studies have shown that the immigration status of Latina domestic violence victims is a significant barrier affecting the decision to report domestic violence to the police.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, perpetrators utilize the threat of deportation (or of stopping immigration paperwork) if the victims report the abuse or leave.<sup>37</sup> The abusers' use of their victim's unstable resident status to threaten deportation if the violence is disclosed is particularly effective because many of the victims lack English proficiency and have little or no knowledge of the U.S. legal system. Therefore, many are unaware of legal procedures that prevent deportation of immigrants experiencing abuse.<sup>38</sup> IPV becomes then a product of complex power relations, and the multiple barriers faced by this studied group arise because of their status as women, Latinas, and undocumented.

There are, in fact, laws with the purpose of protecting undocumented immigrant women from domestic abuse -- but these too come with institutional barriers that still limit the victims' help-seeking behavior. For instance, under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), both documented and undocumented battered immigrant spouses of residents or citizens are entitled to apply for residency and become citizens without the sponsorship of their abusive spouses. Many of the immigrant victims are unaware of this piece of legislation. However, even if they are aware, the application process before USCIS is lengthy, expensive and complicated: it can take more than 8 years to change immigration status, and application fees and costs of supporting documentation may add up to 2,000 dollars, not including lawyers' fees.<sup>39</sup>

Even in cases in which Latina immigrant victims are willing to spend the time and money to go through the application process, there are many other barriers to be surmounted. For instance, the applications require immigrants to possess and provide documents, bills, payment receipts, and health reports that many don't have access to. Therefore, these requirements "weed out the neediest immigrants": these documents prove identity and common residency with the abusive spouse. Therefore, many victims either lack the ability to collect these, might never have possessed such papers, or might not have been able to file/access them because of their abusers.<sup>40</sup>

Another example of a barrier to be surmounted when going through the application process is the requirement of victims to be certified as "cooperative" by police officers that file their case. This is problematic for many reasons, including the aforementioned problematic relationship between immigrants and law

enforcement. Additionally, this certification is problematic both because survivors of violence prefer not to accuse their aggressors -- largely to avoid retaliation -- and many of the requirements to be labeled "cooperative" by the police are unattainable for many battered immigrants. This is especially true because many of them are in unstable living conditions: they move frequently, live in residencies without phone access, or have temporary employment. This increases the likelihood that the attempts of authorities to make contact with the immigrant to request and obtain collaboration will be unsuccessful.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the victims' precarious socioeconomic position, vulnerable undocumented status, and general disadvantaged further complicate their chance of gaining legal help.

### **Practical Implications**

There are a multiplicity of avenues through which the burden of barriers that Latina immigrant victims have to bear can be minimized. Only a few of them, relating to the presented research, will be succinctly discussed.

### **Cultural Barriers**

Some of the discussed cultural values that seem to entrap women in a cycle of disenpowerment could potentially be used in interventions. For instance, the value of *familism* could be utilized in a positive light such that family members can provide extensive collective strength for the victim. This is especially significant since currently the majority of IPV prevention programs in this country take place within the educational system,<sup>42</sup> and as discussed many Latina immigrants have low levels of education. Community programs that focus on the family and that are culturally sensitive and relevant also ought to be employed. These programs and interventions would benefit from addressing deceptive gender roles and expectations that social norms have imposed on men and women stemming from patriarchal values. Further, community-based efforts should also focus on extensive educational and outreach efforts aimed at bringing awareness of legal protections and legal rights for battered immigrants. Information about public health and social services available to immigrants would also benefit the victims.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, shelters' and advocacy centers' staff and workers ought to be trained so that they can provide culturally relevant and effective interventions -- including language

training in Spanish, or employment of Spanish-speaking staff. Trainings to service providers and law enforcement focused on understanding how cultural values and external forces can influence women's decisions when confronted with domestic abuse would also be greatly beneficial.

### Structural Barriers

Reina et al. wisely note that “coordinated response strategies must keep sight of the structural inequalities that place particular constraints on Latina victims as those serve to shape the victimization experience itself.”<sup>44</sup> A focus on poverty, unemployment and economic marginalization, low levels of education, and general isolation ought to be taken into consideration when designing intervention programs for this group of women. For example, access to transportation -- and access to information -- should be considered as imperative gaps to bridge. Importantly, there should be an increased focus on those victims that live in rural areas -- as their place of residency increases the obstacles to be surmounted in order to seek help.

### Institutional Barriers

To enable more attainable, more effective, and more beneficial access of Latina victims to the legal system for help, there should be an increase in law enforcement's training in cultural sensitivity and competency. Training sessions for police officers in general, and those that serve Latino immigrant communities in particular, ought to be geared towards educating them about the intersection of gender, race, class, and legal status, among others. Training sessions should also include language training and a focus on ways that racism can lead to an inappropriate response to IPV situations. On the other hand, interventions should also be geared towards major education efforts to Latino immigrant communities to inform in regards to policies and laws, as well as the availability of programs serving Latino communities and potential solutions.

### Limitations of the Research

There are several limitations to the research conducted and to the cited studies. In general, using the term “Latina immigrants” as a vague and general category obscures the wide ethnic and cultural diversity of women of Latin descent. Assuming that women coming from 20+ countries are a monolithic ethnic category is inaccurate and limiting. Further research ought to be conducted

in regards to specific national origin and its effects on help-seeking behaviors.

Additionally, the gathered data cannot truly be extrapolated to many Latinas facing IPV: those who do not describe themselves as victims, have not sought out institutional help, or have no access to any type of advocacy services.<sup>45</sup> Because most of the literature is based on data from studies that find these women *through resource centers* (Reina et al., 2014, Fuchsel et al., 2012; Pitts, 2014; Vidales, 2010; Villalón, 2010), their data only represents those Latina victims that were able to overcome the barriers to get to the centers in the first place. Further research on those Latina victims that have never contacted any type of advocacy services is needed.

Heteronormativity is another limitation of available literature. All cited studies and texts overlook other types of relationships (e.g., same-sex), in assumption that IPV happens solely with male abusers and female victims. In this sense, there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to different relationship structures.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Reina 2014, pg. 593
- <sup>2</sup> Rivera 1994, pg. 502
- <sup>3</sup> Martin-Baro 1996, pg. 17
- <sup>4</sup> Rivera 1994, pg. 502
- <sup>5</sup> Fuchsel et al. 2012, pg. 267
- <sup>6</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 602
- <sup>7</sup> Vidales 2010, pg. 537
- <sup>8</sup> Fuchsel et al. 2012, pg. 268
- <sup>9</sup> Vidales 2010, pg. 537
- <sup>10</sup> Fuchsel et al. 2012, pg. 268
- <sup>11</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 603
- <sup>12</sup> Vidales 2010, pg. 536
- <sup>13</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 608
- <sup>14</sup> Fuchsel et al. 2012, pg. 269
- <sup>15</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 607
- <sup>16</sup> Vidales 2010, pg. 537
- <sup>17</sup> Pitts 2014, pg. 1662
- <sup>18</sup> Reina et al. 2014 pg. 605
- <sup>19</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008
- <sup>20</sup> Vidales 2010, pg. 538
- <sup>21</sup> O'Brien 1993
- <sup>22</sup> Vidales 2010, pg. 538
- <sup>23</sup> Pitts 2014, pg. 1669
- <sup>24</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 605
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 607
- <sup>27</sup> Rivera et al. 2014, pg. 505
- <sup>28</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 610
- <sup>29</sup> Pitts 2014, pg. 1663
- <sup>30</sup> Vidales 2010, pg. 539
- <sup>31</sup> Rivera 1994, pg. 504
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 601
- <sup>34</sup> Rivera 1994, pg. 503
- <sup>35</sup> Pitts 2014, pg. 1671
- <sup>36</sup> See Raj & Silverman, 2002; Pitts 2014; Vidales 2010; Reina et al. 2014
- <sup>37</sup> See Dutton, Orloff, & Hass, 2000; Vidales 2010, 539; Reina et al. 2014, 600

<sup>38</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 601

<sup>39</sup> Villalón 2010, pg. 554

<sup>40</sup> Villalón 2010, pg. 557

<sup>41</sup> Villalón 2010, pg. 555

<sup>42</sup> Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010

<sup>43</sup> Reina et al. 2014, pg. 610

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

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