Empowerment through Peer Counseling: Developing Immigrant Women as Advocates and Leaders

MUJERES UNIDAS Y ACTIVAS

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DEVELOPING IMMIGRANT WOMEN AS ADVOCATES AND LEADERS

A Case Study

Personal Transformation and Building Community Power

From our own personal experience, we saw a lack of Spanish-language services when we sought help for ourselves and we wanted to change that and ensure more inclusive practices for Latina women.

- Mujeres Unidas y Activas

Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) was established to empower Latina women to overcome domestic violence and become community leaders. In order to accomplish its organizational mission of “promoting personal transformation and building community power,” MUA recognizes that monolingual Latina immigrant domestic violence (DV) survivors are best suited to empower their peers by leading Spanish-language support groups and serving as certified Spanish-language peer counselors with Latina immigrant women in a Bay Area shelter.

MUA’s theory of change was shaped by research that it commissioned in 2009 to better understand the experience of Latina women seeking domestic violence services and housing at shelters in the Bay Area. The resulting report, *Echoes from the Silence: Raising our Voices*¹, revealed that most Latinas found it difficult to find Spanish-language and culturally appropriate services. Although 70% of women interviewed had never sought services at a shelter, those that did reported several challenges such as staff members not having enough time to review their cases, prohibiting young adults from staying at the shelter, or could not speak Spanish. A MUA leader provides additional context:

We looked at how different services responded to the needs of Latina immigrant women. We learned that many service providers, shelters, and agencies did not have any Spanish-speaking staff. Also, none of their documents and regulations were translated into Spanish. Many of these providers did not have a cultural understanding of immigrant Latina women and their needs.

Further, the research indicated that Latina immigrant women felt more comfortable with and were more likely to access programs and resources if they were delivered by a peer who they identify with, who could speak the same language, and who had faced similar challenges in accessing services. As a result of this research, MUA developed a peer counseling empowerment model and began training and placing advocates at shelters.

In 2012, MUA expanded its efforts to establish partnerships with Bay Area shelters so as to better serve Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant DV survivors throughout the region. This work, funded by a grant from the Blue Shield Against Violence Cultural Competency (BSAV CC) Project², sought to not only continue training Spanish-speaking


² The Blue Shield Against Violence (BSAV), a program of the Blue Shield of California Foundation, commissioned research focused on defining cultural competency and examining the barriers and opportunities to advance cultural competency in
Latina immigrant domestic violence survivors and community members as peer counselors but also to develop a culturally responsive model that could be replicated at other Bay Area shelters that work with this community. As part of this project, MUA also developed their theory of change to illustrate how its peer counseling empowerment model and its strategies for establishing partnerships with other shelters will improve access to existing domestic violence services for Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant women.

This case study shares the story of MUA’s efforts to train others and to replicate its peer counseling empowerment model as well as its successes and challenges for establishing partnerships with other Bay Area shelters. This case study ends by sharing recommendations for providing culturally competent, linguistically appropriate domestic violence services to Latina immigrant women.

**MUA’s Theory of Change**

MUA’s primary vision is to work towards a “world where all women are able to live with respect, dignity, and self-determination and are free from violence.” The BSAV CC grant-funded project contributed to this goal by allowing MUA to (1) train more than 40 Latina Spanish-speaking peer advocates, (2) hold individual and group peer counseling sessions at MUA and partner organizations, (3) expand its networks through the development of 15–20 partnerships, and (4) seek out three Bay Area shelters at which to replicate its peer counseling empowerment model. Through these strategies, MUA seeks to diminish Latina domestic violence survivors’ distrust of service providers and thereby improve Latina survivors’ access to existing services, and to increase community awareness and understanding of domestic violence and resources available in the community. Ultimately, MUA aims to increase its organizational capacity to reach, educate, and empower Latina immigrant domestic violence survivors based on a strengthening of cultural competency and replication of its model.
**Mujeres Unidas y Activas Theory of Change**

**VISION:** Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) is working for a world where all women are able to live with respect, dignity, and self-determination and are free from violence.

### Goals

- **Increase organizational capacity** by training 40 Latina, Spanish-speaking DV survivors to provide culturally competenent and linguistically appropriate services to the Latina immigrant community in the Bay Area.
- **Promote the implementation of cultural competency practices** in DV and non-DV organizations that serve Latina, Spanish-speaking immigrant domestic violence survivors.
- **Hold individual and group Peer Counseling sessions** at MUA and partner organizations.

### Innovative Strategies

- **A context to address** and acknowledge the intersection of race, class, immigration status with the domestic violence field.
- **Working with key diverse alliances** at the local, regional, national, and international level to effect social change.
- **Providing trainings to increase leadership and advocacy capacity** of MUA members.

### MUA’s Pathway to Leadership

**Capacity Building Strategies**

- Provide leadership training to 40 Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant domestic violence survivors and community members as peer advocates.
- Hold individual and group Peer Counseling sessions at MUA and partner organizations.

### BSAV Cultural Competency Initiative Project Outcomes

**Capacity Building Outcomes**

- Spanish-speaking domestic violence survivors and immigrant community members trained as community leaders that recognize and stop cycle of violence in their families and communities.
- Diminished DV survivors distrust of DV providers.
- Improved access to existing domestic violence services for Spanish speaking Latina immigrant domestic violence clients.
- Increased community awareness and understanding of domestic violence and access to existing domestic violence community resources.

**Strengthed Network Outcomes**

- Strengthened networks with Bay Area Domestic Violence providers to increase awareness of specific needs and challenges faced by Latina, Spanish-speaking immigrant domestic violence survivors.
- Increased cultural competency practices.

**Ultimate Outcome:** Increase organizational capacity to reach, educate and empower Latina, immigrant domestic violence survivors based on a greater cultural competency and replication of Peer Counseling Empowerment model in DV and non-DV providers.

### Strengthed Network Strategies

- Educate and build collaborations with 20 partners.
- Replicate Peer Counseling Empowerment Model with at least three Bay Area housing shelters.
- Hold two Si Se Puedes DV Educational Conferences to advocate and increase access to DV and non-DV community resources.

### Innovative Strategies

The main objective of MUA’s 2009 research report was “to improve the quality of domestic violence services offered to Latina women in Spanish, and open spaces where the realities of Latina immigrant survivors are heard, understood and valued.” Through this research process, MUA refined its definition of domestic violence with the understanding that domestic violence is **complex, multi-faceted and influenced by societal and cultural norms.** MUA defines domestic violence as a “form of behavior used by one person to maintain power and control over another person.” In their *Echoes from the Silence* report, MUA defined the features of this power and control in the following way:

- **Domestic violence happens** in the family and is silent, hidden, and maintained by social and cultural norms, such as Machismo.
- **Domestic violence impacts** and is impacted by other forms of violence, such as political violence (i.e. incarceration of undocumented immigrants); community violence (i.e. neighborhoods with high levels of crime and little resources); economic violence (i.e. exploitation of immigrant labor).
- **For immigrant women,** threats about immigration status are often used by their partners as a form of power and control.
- **Although domestic violence can impact** anyone, most victims are women and children.

As noted above, MUA has developed a comprehensive understanding of how DV affects immigrant women using a gender-based analysis (focused on *Machismo*) that considers the power of immigration status and societal norms in maintaining gender inequality. A MUA staff member explained:
It’s hard to cut away from our culture and belief systems. We all come with baggage and these are all factors that make it difficult for women to battle domestic violence but are critical to fully comprehend how domestic violence affects our Latina women and how to better think of approaches that cater to their needs and culture.

Using this deep knowledge of how the intersection of race, class, and immigration status affects DV services, MUA developed an approach, or “leadership pathway,” for expanding access to services for Latina immigrant DV survivors. First, MUA sought to expand its unique peer advocate training program for immigrant women through capacity building and increased training opportunities. Second, it sought to expand placements for peer advocates through a network strengthened by the engagement of new partners, particularly shelters that could place Spanish language advocates, and by enhanced education and outreach on issues facing immigrant Latinas via its annual Si Se Puede conference.

MUA’S THEORY OF INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY CHANGE: BY HELPING YOU HEAL, I HEAL

MUA’s staff members explain that the DV survivor’s personal healing journey can be summarized in the phrase “By Helping You Heal, I Heal.” A Latina woman who experiences domestic violence typically arrives at MUA with low self-esteem and feels uneasy about seeking support from mainstream DV agencies. Peer counseling sessions build her emotional strength, and eventually she is invited to attend weekly support sessions and workshops. If she is seeking help at county or law enforcement agencies, MUA offers her accompaniment services. During this period, the woman is able to express and share her experience with domestic violence and begins the process of self-empowerment, ultimately making the decision to leave her domestic violence situation. She can then participate in a four-week counseling and workshop facilitator training led by MUA staff members. Once she has completed this initial training and has become actively involved in the organization, she is invited to participate in MUA’s domestic violence peer counseling training, which helps her become a “leader of her life, family, and community.” At this point she has become an agent of change and participates in MUA’s immigrant and workers’ rights campaigns. Through this process, a domestic violence survivor is healed and in turn becomes strong enough to begin healing her peers.

BY HELPING YOU HEAL, I HEAL EMPOWERMENT MODEL

- Woman enters with low self-esteem
- Reaches out or is referred to MUA
- Begins attending and participating in workshops and peer counseling sessions
- Becomes a Certified DV peer advocate and agent of change for immigrant issues
Expanding Leadership and Advocacy Training for MUA members

*We have first-hand experience of seeking domestic violence services and not being able to find them. We are all Latina immigrant women—we all come to this country without a home, documents, or a job, so I believe we have a connection with many women because of these experiences. We are one of the few organizations in the Bay Area that adapts our services and trainings to meet the needs of Latina immigrant women.*

-MUA Peer Counselor

The primary goal of the BSAV CC grant was to deepen opportunities for members by expanding MUA’s 30-hour DV Peer Counseling Certification training program. The goal of this program is to help women learn skills that will not only advance their healing journey but also promote their abilities as leaders who can reach and engage Latina immigrant DV survivors and facilitate workshops.

Over the two-year grant period, MUA trained 42 women to become certified peer counselors. In the first year, these women participated in a training that enhanced facilitation and outreach skills. During the second year, they were trained in a Spanish-language DV Peer Counseling Certification program which was jointly delivered by an external skilled certified DV peer counseling trainer and MUA staff members. Participants were provided with information on a series of DV-specific topics that included DV myths and realities, confidentiality, the effect of DV on children and families, creating exit plans, DV in the LGBTQ community, and sources of community resources and support. In addition, MUA organized a series of English as a Second Language (ESL) DV classes to build the capacity of peer counselors in their advocacy and engagement efforts. These classes were focused on grammar and vocabulary skill development and helped peer counselors communicate more effectively with other service providers when they assisted Latina DV survivors with making appointments or accompanied them to other agencies.

After the women complete their peer counseling and DV training, they put into practice their new knowledge and skills by facilitating weekly support sessions and one-on-one support workshops, such as *Clinicas del Alma* (Clinics of the Soul), which are held at both of MUA’s locations. A small cohort is also placed at a local Bay Area shelter to provide Spanish-language assistance, peer support, and outreach. These experienced peer counselors are able to facilitate these clinics, which provide survivors a safe space to share their DV stories and validate their experiences while at the same time helping them through their healing journeys.

**Strengthened Network Strategies**

The second major component of the BSAV CC grant was to support MUA’s effort to create and strengthen its collaborations with DV shelters and other agencies to enhance culturally competent services for Latina immigrant women. MUA used three different strategies to strengthen its partnerships with other local organizations:

**SELECTION CRITERIA for DV Peer Counseling Training Program**

- is a DV survivor who has faced barriers while accessing DV services at county agencies, nonprofit organizations, and shelters,
- is reflective of the Latina immigrant community and is knowledgeable of the root causes of gender inequality and family violence within the Latino context, and
- has been involved as a facilitator at MUA for at least one year, either by organizing workshops or serving as a committee member.
**Educate and collaborate with at least 20 local organizations.** MUA has been heavily involved in advocating for DV and immigrant issues on a more systemic level. The organization’s leaders understand that building coalitions and allies and establishing partnerships with multiple organizations is integral to advocacy and to increasing access to DV services. With this in mind, MUA used BSAV CC funds to reach out to other local organizations that work with Latino communities. MUA is a part of *La Red Latina En Contra de la Violencia Domestica y de Genero* (or, the Latino Network Against Domestic and Gender Violence) which includes 31 community service organizations that seek to increase awareness of and prevent domestic violence as well as facilitate access to services.

**Replicate MUA’s Peer Counseling Empowerment Model.** During the first year of the grant, MUA identified 10 potential shelters that were located near its San Francisco and Oakland offices as potential locations for replicating its peer counseling empowerment program. MUA reached out to shelter staff leaders to organize a one-time group meeting where they could share MUA’s mission, program, and services as well as explain their successful peer counseling partnership with Ruby’s House.

This effort encountered difficulties, however. First, shelter staff members said they had limited time to attend an off-site meeting because they were busy providing a complex range of supports for women needing emergency housing. MUA’s Co-Director responded by scheduling in-person, one-on-one meetings with leaders and staff members of four Bay Area DV shelters at their locations. Second, while shelter staff members expressed interest in MUA’s peer counseling empowerment model, they mentioned that they lacked the organizational capacity or funding to formalize a partnership. Through this process, it became apparent that establishing partnerships requires extensive time and effort and that many domestic violence agencies lack the infrastructure or funding needed to develop programs that can improve access to culturally competent DV services. MUA continues to be in conversation with staff from two of these shelters to determine if they can launch a formal partnership that can replicate MUA’s model.

**Organize Two Local Community Conferences to Increase Awareness.** As part of the BSAV grant, MUA organized two *Si Se Puede* (Yes We Can) community conferences/resource fairs focused on DV awareness, prevention, and facilitating access to resources. MUA peer counselors and other members planned the conference by reaching out to local organizations to provide information on resources and supports, developing and delivering workshops on topics such as DV prevention and masculinity, clinics on family law and restraining orders, and community activities for children. These events were highly successful and brought together more than 20 service providers and nonprofit organizations and reached over 400 people in Oakland and San Francisco.

**Project Outcomes and Impacts**

*MUA is reflective of the community they’re serving which adds to their legitimacy and recognition within the Latino community. MUA staff and leadership live the reality of living in the US as Latina immigrants. MUA has such a deep understanding of what is needed for the members DV survivors. To be in a different country and to demonstrate that there are women that have made it and are ok—that is empowering.*

-MUA Peer Counselor

Though MUA was unable to create a partnership with other Bay Area shelters to replicate their peer counseling empowerment program, MUA reported that their project brought about noteworthy organizational and member outcomes. Through this project, MUA developed a theory of change to present how their peer counseling empowerment transforms DV survivors into agents of change and improve culturally competent services for Latina immigrant women. In addition, the project provided helped MUA continue training Latina immigrants as DV peer
counselors and who work directly with survivors to begin the healing process. As a whole, MUA leaders are committed to continue identifying and implementing culturally competent resources and practices throughout the organization. Three noteworthy outcomes are described below.

- **Increased capacity to train MUA members to provide high-quality peer support services.** MUA trained 42 women as certified DV peer counselors over the two-year grant period. Currently, these 42 women volunteer at MUA’s offices and a local shelter conducting outreach to their peers, making referrals, and providing specialized support to Spanish-speaking Latina DV survivors. MUA also implemented an ESL DV peer counselors’ curriculum that helps counselors build vocabulary and grammar skills that allow them to better support the women they work with. MUA members have expressed their appreciation for being able to “put into practice the information and skills” they learned from their DV training.

- **Strengthened relationship with a local shelter that continues to provide culturally competent practices for Latina immigrant DV survivors.** MUA members have become fully integrated at Ruby’s House, where they directly provide support, facilitate access to DV resources, and facilitate one-on-one individual and peer counseling sessions to Latina women seeking assistance. This collaboration has enhanced services for immigrant DV survivors by increasing the shelter’s organizational capacity to reach and engage Latina women.

- **A foundation for replicating the peer counseling empowerment model at other Bay Area shelters.** Throughout the course of the two-year grant period, MUA laid the foundation for replicating its peer counseling empowerment model. MUA will continue to reach out to additional DV organizations and shelters to educate their staff members about the benefits of its program and its ability to improve services for Latina immigrant DV survivors.

**Lessons for the Field**

MUA has pursued an innovative strategy for providing culturally competent services for Latina immigrant DV survivors. Mainstream agencies can better understand the culturally specific needs of Latina women by hiring culturally competent and Spanish-speaking staff members or by partnering with organizations such as MUA. In order to do this, however, mainstream organizations need to have a commitment to allocate resources and time to this effort, something that may require action on the part of policymakers or funders. The following are key lessons for the field:

- **Domestic violence organizations must understand the intersectionality of race, class, and immigration status and how it afflicts Latina immigrant survivors.** MUA’s experience in working with Latina immigrant women has demonstrated how deeply they fear and mistrust mainstream DV agencies. In order to create a culturally responsive and safe environment for women, domestic violence organizations must gain a greater understanding for the complex and multi-faceted challenges faced by Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant DV survivors. Culturally specific organizations, such as MUA, can provide guidance and support as Latina DV survivors interact with complex public agency programs.

- **Organizations must have the organizational capacity and readiness to embark on implementing culturally competent DV practices within their organization.** While shelters were eager to learn about the needs for immigrant DV survivors, they lacked the staff capacity and funding to integrate MUA’s peer counseling program within their shelter. Thus, organizations thinking about incorporating such programs
could increase their readiness by working with organizations like MUA to begin thinking and identifying strategies for improving their current CC practices.

- **Organizations that work with DV survivors need more support in order to facilitate partnerships and to strengthen the networks for providing culturally competent DV services at the local level.** As demonstrated through MUA’s experience and the textbox below, developing successful partnerships requires a long-term approach that encourages both collaborations between organizations and strengthening the organizational readiness and infrastructures of mainstream DV organizations. A least three types of support are needed:
  - encouragement to form diverse coalitions to end violence against women, with organizations that focus on underserved populations, such as MUA, playing a central role in reaching and engaging DV survivors
  - resources that support organizational capacity building and the efforts of coalition facilitators in bringing diverse organizations together (e.g. in-house bilingual staff members to facilitate communication and coordination, ability to pay stipends to community leaders and volunteers, etc.)
  - funding for collaboration efforts designed to increase culturally competent practices for underserved populations.

- **Innovative program models, such as MUA’s peer counseling empowerment program, play a key role in expanding and enhancing services for culturally competent DV services.** MUA’s partnership with Ruby’s House serves as a primary example of how innovative strategies can make culturally competent DV services available for underserved populations. Because peer counselors come from the community, know the target population, speak the language, and share similar values and life experiences, they can more effectively reach and engage underserved DV populations that mainstream DV organizations have been struggling to achieve.

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**MUA’s Partnership with Ruby’s House**

**Key Components for a Successful Partnership to Promote Cultural Competency**

Ruby’s House, a Bay Area shelter, reached out to MUA before the BSAV CC Project in 2010 to learn about its peer counseling empowerment model. The shelter seen an increase in Latina DV survivors needing emergency housing assistance but lacked bilingual staff. In order to serve local Latina immigrant women seeking emergency housing, the shelter consulted with MUA and hired a Spanish-speaking case manager.

Building on the trust established from this prior relationship, Ruby’s House established a more formal partnership with MUA as part of the BSAV CC grant. The grant allowed MUA to provide Spanish-speaking peer counselors who could provide direct outreach in the community, provide one-on-one peer counseling support, and connect women with services and resources. Ruby’s House leaders understood that as part of its commitment in working with MUA counselors, they needed to ensure that the peer counselors working at the shelter receive a monthly stipend, which provides a source of income and financial empowerment for these women.

As with any new, emerging partnership, the shelter and MUA had to make continuous changes to ensure that the counseling program ran smoothly. The Spanish-speaking case manager was critical in enhancing
As a culturally specific domestic violence organization, MUA understands that it is not possible for one organization alone to empower Latina women to overcome domestic violence. However, through the development of a powerful peer counseling model and MUA’s efforts to train a critical mass of leaders and partner with mainstream domestic violence organizations, MUA is generating important lessons about what it takes to carefully listen to Latina immigrant women’s needs and to engage in long-term partnerships to end domestic violence for marginalized communities.

the capacity of Ruby’s House to work directly with the predominately Spanish-speaking MUA peer counselors and provided an orientation to the shelter’s policies, processes, and services. It also became apparent that MUA members also needed to learn English to better serve and advocate for Latina immigrant DV survivors. Thus, in the second year of the partnership, MUA organized ESL classes for 23 peer counselors in late 2013.