

Women Who Stay:

*Perspectives of Latina Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence on Staying With
or Leaving Abusive Partners*

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Introduction

Many women, regardless of race or ethnicity, choose to continue to live with partners who have been (or continue to be) abusive. Traditional domestic violence intervention approaches have emphasized women leaving abusive relationships, but the applicability and acceptability of this approach for women from culturally diverse backgrounds, including immigrant and Latina survivors of IPV, is not well understood. While few studies have focused specifically on Latina survivors' experience of staying, research to date has identified a number of reasons why women may decide to remain with male partners who have used violence against them, including higher relative levels of violence, emotional attachment, and children (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007; Griffing, Ragin, Morrison, Sage, Madry, & Primm, 2005). The purpose of this study was to examine the contexts of Latina women currently living with their partners, and to inform recommendations for researchers and practitioners working with Latina survivors of IPV.

Casa de Esperanza has chosen to use “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people or things that are either gender neutral or both masculine and feminine in make-up. This decision reflects our commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that both men and women make to our communities.

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Current Study

This study engaged Latina survivors staying with abusive partners and explored their experiences of staying and factors relevant to their decision to stay. Latina participants were recruited from two community domestic violence intervention programs specializing in providing linguistically and culturally-specific services to Latina women and children: Caminar Latino (Atlanta, Georgia) and Casa de Esperanza (St. Paul, Minnesota). Two focus groups were conducted as a response to observations on the part of advocates and community members on the common experiences of Latina women staying with their partners.

Method

- Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for protection of human subjects for this study was received through Georgia State University.
- Women attending the support groups at Caminar Latino and Casa de Esperanza who were still living with their partners were invited to participate. The average age of women was approximately 36 and the majority of women were of Mexican origin.
- Five Latina women (monolingual Spanish speakers) participated in the Caminar Latino focus group.
- Five women were recruited from Casa de Esperanza based on involvement in at least one community development education program. Women in Minnesota were similar to the Caminar Latino sample. All were in heterosexual relationships, ranged from 21-39 years of age, and were primarily of Mexican origin. More women in the Casa de Esperanza focus group were bilingual in English and Spanish (n=3).

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- Focus group facilitators from both sites used the following **guiding questions**:
 - » What are things that influence your decision to stay with your partner?
 - » What has your family said about you staying? Your children? Other people? What other things have influenced your decision?
 - » How does staying in the relationship affect your family? Your partner? Your children? Other family members? How does it affect you?
 - » What is pleasant or good about staying in the relationship?
 - » What has been difficult about staying in the relationship?

Analysis

Four research assistants working at the National Latin@ Research Center for Family and Social Change, housed at Georgia State University, independently coded focus group data and met to discuss impressions and resolve discrepancies. A phenomenological approach guided thematic coding using Nvivo 9 software (Creswell, 2007):

- Each transcript was read in its entirety in order to become familiar with the content,
- Significant statements were highlighted and coded,
- The statements were then synthesized to create a set of the salient themes.

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Findings

Below are themes identified in the focus group transcriptions from both sites:

- **Family:** Minor children were important to the women's experience and decisions related to staying with their partners. They reported both positive & negative themes regarding children, including:
 - » Their children's relationship with and perceptions of their fathers (negative for some, while positive for others). One woman described positive feelings of living with her child and partner together:

"That brings me satisfaction to see her that she is happy and that she can go with her father to work or decide to go with me." -Atlanta participant
 - » Concerns about behavioral problems of minor children.
 - » The negative impact the situation has had on a woman's relationship with her children.
 - » In the context of decisions to stay or leave partners, women talked about the value of protecting children from witnessing violence and ending intergenerational cycles of violence.
 - » Partners and relationships with partners were often mentioned in the context of the larger family.
 - » Male partners were also referred to affectionately. One woman described her attraction and feelings of love for her partner while at the same time acknowledging negative feelings:

"Well, yes, when I met him, yes, I fell in love with him, and still on occasion I see him and he looks very attractive and stuff, but also at times I see him very negatively." -Atlanta participant
 - » Women also identified their hope for change and for the future, or discussed changes male partners had already made:

"...because one always hopes that the person will change...I make my own conclusions that...that hopefully one day he will change. That he will smile and that he will smile at us." -Atlanta participant

"Well, yes, when I met him, yes, I fell in love with him, and still on occasion I see him and he looks very attractive and stuff, but also at times I see him very negatively."

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“But [leaving] was not that easy. For example if I left him, pregnant and with a one-year-old child, where was I going to go?”

- **Intergenerational Transmission of Violence:** Women described violence within their families and experiences with parents and siblings. Additionally, women described perceived obligations to stay with their partners despite their experiences of abuse. One woman expressed concern about retaliation from male members of her own family. For this woman, violence in her family extended beyond her partner.
- **Economic and Financial Considerations:** Women in this study expressed concern related to providing for their children, and receiving financial support from male partners. One woman described her concerns for the wellbeing of her children:
“But [leaving] was not that easy. For example if I left him, pregnant and with a one-year-old child, where was I going to go?” -Minnesota participant
- **Working Towards Independence:** Women spoke about wanting independence from their partners and discussed multiple challenges to meeting this goal, including limited ability to speak English, limited experience navigating transportation systems, and limited social support in close proximity. Women also acknowledged taking steps toward addressing these challenges:
“I couldn’t even speak English...now I go to English classes and read a book on self-improvement...when a person does not have knowledge it’s easier for the abuser.” -Minnesota participant
- **Awareness:** Women reflected on building awareness of what constitutes violence and identifying whether or not they are being abused. Awareness was also tied to knowledge and use of resources:
“One has many stages during which one does not identify [the violence], but one gets to the point in which one [learns] from others. I am seeing a psychologist and going to classes at Casa de Esperanza.” -Minnesota participant

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- **Sense of Agency:** Women in our study reflected on their ability to act or to change the state of their relationship. Women reported that leaving their partners was extremely difficult, but noted that it was not impossible. Other women described their hope that the relationship would change.
- **Health Consequences:** Many of the women described the negative physical and mental health consequences that staying in the relationship had on themselves and/or their children:

“There is no peace inside of me...I cannot sleep.” -Atlanta participant

“My life was in danger...maybe not my life, but my physical and mental health; I was in a psychiatric hospital. I weighed 98 pounds, I did not have hair...[my skin] was yellow, I had anemia, it was a horrible life. -Minnesota participant

- » In describing her daughter, one woman commented:
“She is very insecure all of the time. That is what we created in her. Lots and lots of fear.” -Atlanta participant
- » One woman described the stress experienced from ongoing worry about the decision of whether to stay in her relationship:
“For me the most difficult part is that I think too much. I think that I think too much regarding the decision. It’s in my mind all of the time.” -Atlanta participant

“She is very insecure all of the time. That is what we created in her. Lots and lots of fear.”