

Listening Circles

With Latin@ Faith Leaders and Community Members

September 21 to 22 and December 2 to 3, 2020



interfaith partnership against
domestic violence and elder abuse





Table of contents

Introduction	3
Goals of Listening Circles.....	4
Process	4
Participants	5
Questions Asked	5
What Are You Seeing or What Concerns You in Your Community? How Have You Responded?	5
What Do You Need? What Are the Community Needs? What Resources Do You Wish You Had?	8
Conclusion	13

We are deeply grateful to the Office on Violence Against Women of the U.S. Department of Justice for their guidance and support of this groundbreaking work. It is an honor to share the journey with you.

This project is supported by Grant No. 2017-TA-AX-K060, awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

Introduction

In 2020, Safe Havens and Esperanza United partnered to conduct two Listening Circles with Latin@¹ faith leaders and community members about faith and intimate partner violence (IPV), which is also called domestic violence (DV). The reason for the Listening Circles was to provide a forum to talk about the strengths and needs of Latin@ faith communities, to learn more about how best to engage their strengths and meet the identified needs, and to explore whether an Esperanza United/Safe Havens partnership could provide culturally responsive resources to meet those needs. We know that with appropriate training and resources, faith leaders can play an integral role in helping faithful people who experience abuse reach physical, emotional, and spiritual safety. Faith is central to Latin@ communities in the U.S.

The Listening Circles associated with this project were affected significantly by COVID-19. We had initially envisioned in-person Listening Circles in St. Paul, MN and Boston, MA. Due to the pandemic, we had to postpone the Listening Circles. In the Fall of 2020, given the ongoing pandemic crisis, we decided instead to provide virtual Listening Circles. In order to compensate for the fact that we were not all in the same room (and thus it was harder to build trust), we added a pre-session to each Listening Circle that allowed us to get to know one another before launching into a topic that is difficult for many faith leaders to discuss.

Both Listening Circles were facilitated by Esperanza United and conducted entirely in Spanish. The sessions included transcribers, closed captioners, and interpreters to accommodate both Spanish and English speakers. The pre-sessions/sessions were held on September 21 and 22 and December 1 and 2, 2020.

This is a summary of themes, opinions, and learnings shared by faith leaders who attended the virtual Listening Circles.

¹ Esperanza United uses “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people or groups that are gender neutral or both masculine and feminine. This decision reflects Esperanza United’s commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that women, men, and gender-nonconforming people make to our communities.

Goals of Listening Circles

The goals of the Listening Circles included assessing the current trends surrounding intimate partner violence (IPV) in Latin@ faith communities, learning about the cases of IPV that Latin@ faith leaders are seeing and hearing about in their community, and identifying any gaps in services, resources, or training that Latin@ faith leaders have regarding IPV in their faith communities. In addition, the Listening Circles were developed to identify training or resources that Latin@ faith leaders wish they had. Safe Havens' ultimate goal was to determine how to best partner with Esperanza United to provide culturally responsive resources, services, and trainings to Latin@ faith communities.

Process

Safe Havens and Esperanza United conducted two virtual Listening Circles with Latin@ faith leaders (both clergy and lay leaders) to learn more about the strengths and needs within the community when it comes to supporting people experiencing sexual and domestic violence or IPV. While the initial plan was to host in-person Listening Circles in St. Paul, MN and Boston, MA, the virtual format allowed us to recruit from outside the original locations.

Safe Havens and Esperanza United staff were responsible for recruiting faith leaders (clergy and lay) who were part of Latin@ faith communities. Most participants were Latin@ themselves and all spoke Spanish. Interpretation into English and closed captioning were both provided.

Each Listening Circle was divided into two parts over two days. On the first day, participants spent an hour getting to know each other, staff from Safe Havens, and the facilitators from Esperanza United. We began with some questions: *What is your name? Where do you live and work? What is your faith community and role within your faith community? What is your favorite food?* After these initial introductory questions, we asked participants to describe an ordinary day in their lives. On the second day, participants spent an hour and a half answering more specific questions. The Listening Circles took place on September 21 and 22, 2020 and on December 1 and 2, 2020.

Participants

There were 12 Listening Circle participants: two from the Midwest (IA, MN), three from Puerto Rico, and the rest of the participants represented the East Coast, primarily Massachusetts. There were two facilitators from Esperanza United, and three Safe Havens staff were also in the room.

Participants were spiritually affiliated with the Baptist, Episcopal, and Christian churches. The two Latina facilitators identified as Catholic.

Questions Asked

1. What are you seeing in your community?
2. What are your concerns around these issues?
3. Have you ever provided support to individuals impacted by intimate partner violence?
4. How has the need for your support increased?
5. How have you supported those who turn to you for help?
6. What support, training, or resources have you been given? Where do you turn for help on this?
7. What resources or training do you wish you had?
8. What are your dreams for stronger families in your community? How do we get there?

What Are You Seeing or What Concerns You in Your Community? How Have You Responded?

This is a summary of the comments and concerns mentioned during the Listening Circles in response to Questions 1 through 5. Participants often answered these questions together, so we have combined these answers in this summary.

- ◆ There is a group of girls in the church experiencing physical, psychological violence. There is culture shock – these are all girls from Central and Latin America. Sometimes they are renting rooms in the U.S. without family nearby. The landlords perpetrate sexual

assault and abuse. Sometimes these young women are locked in their rooms, their phones are taken away, and they are only allowed out to work.

- ◆ The messages from families and schools clash/are in conflict.²
- ◆ Youth try to become someone, a leader at school, but are kept more submissive at home.
- ◆ Balancing between two cultures is complicated. Youth try to “bridge the gap” and be respectful to both cultures. They are encouraged to be all they can be, but the pandemic has added new challenges and stresses to this situation.
- ◆ The pandemic has been a decisive moment for domestic violence (DV) work. The prevalence has increased, and we must look before and after the pandemic to make sense of it. Before, there was a recognizable cycle of abuse.
- ◆ COVID-19 has increased stressors of DV. People have a short fuse.
- ◆ Every issue grows during quarantine. We were NOT prepared for this with the right type of “links,” connections, and relationships.
- ◆ The pandemic has meant that the abused and abuser are together for long periods of time in the same physical space. This has compounded the isolation that usually goes with abuse.
- ◆ There has been an increase in needs within families in many areas.
- ◆ Mothers are desperate. Home schooling causes much stress. There have been lots of burdens on mothers with not enough tools to deal with this.
- ◆ People are living in crowded spaces. Resources and stores are closed but liquor stores remain open.
- ◆ Older kids have been caring for younger kids. There have been evictions and increasing poverty. Many are sharing apartments because people in the family are homeless. This increases the chances of spreading COVID-19.

² Staff at Esperanza United have also noted this dynamic in their direct service work with youth in St. Paul, MN. Youth in the community may be uncertain about where and how they belong.

- ◆ In Puerto Rico, survival strategies that survivors usually use (like going to work or out to do errands) no longer work because community members cannot leave their homes due to the pandemic.
- ◆ Specifically relating to Puerto Rico, 16 women were killed this year. Hurricanes, earthquakes, and the pandemic have taken a toll. They are in mourning and afraid. Many safe houses and services have closed because of COVID-19.
- ◆ There is a lot of family conflict. Violence has peaked.
- ◆ There is danger in accepting this reality as normal. We need to be very creative to solve the problem before time goes by.
- ◆ Strict gender roles create challenges and difficulties. Addressing this has not been an emphasis in prevention/intervention work.
- ◆ Some “helpers” take advantage of the situation. They may sexually abuse immigrant youth or take control of their money, insurance card, and other legal documentation.
- ◆ Women who come from the most humble classes report earlier. Women who are professionals clam up. In women’s groups, faith groups, we always hear these stories. At higher social levels, women don’t recognize that they are being abused.³
- ◆ Faith leaders have struggled to be present with their congregants as they were before the pandemic.
- ◆ One male participant learned that abuse goes beyond physical violence to include manipulation and many forms of abuse (psychological, emotional, spiritual, sexual, financial). He believes his role is to support women.
- ◆ One male participant shared that he twice confronted abusers to set a limit as a man. He also believes that it is important for him to model “a different and more healthy example of manhood.”

³ This is something Esperanza United staff have also witnessed through their prevention work. Survivors experience a sense of losing status and concern of what society would say if they disclose a situation of violence. In addition, survivors of color many times run into people they know when reaching out to culturally specific organizations for support. This could be both a challenge and a motivation.

Emerging Themes: Spiritual leaders feel they haven't been able to provide what they did before the pandemic in the face of increased needs and deepening isolation. Faith leaders and congregations need more resources and support. The violence existed prior to COVID-19, but the virus has increased barriers to safety and removed some coping/healing/safety responses.

What Do You Need? What Are the Community Needs? What Resources Do You Wish You Had?

This is a summary of the resources, needs, and responses mentioned during the Listening Circles in answer to Questions 6, 7, and 8. Following each summary statement (in bold) are supporting quotes from participants.

We Need to Recognize that there is Violence within the Walls of Faith Communities

- ◆ “We as a church have a big responsibility; we must acknowledge that violence exists, it is real, it is not just a demon.”
- ◆ “Home is not always the safe place we picture it to be.”
- ◆ “Long-term change is needed.”
- ◆ “We need to give women tools. We need to listen and support our sisters. It is very difficult to speak up in a congregation or with friends.”

We Need to Recognize that Faith Changes Everything for a Survivor

- ◆ “The processes [for getting to safety] for people who live a secular life are different from those who live within a faith community.”
- ◆ “Faith can be both a barrier to safety and a source of healing.”
- ◆ “Some women say, ‘he loves me; it won’t happen again.’ How do we address this from a faith perspective?”

Faith Communities Need to Respond because They Bear some Responsibility

- ◆ “Faith communities need to free families from spirituality/faith traditions that support abuse by identifying resources within their traditions that undercut abuse and support healthy relationships and families.”
- ◆ “How do we [faith leaders] free the families from a notion of spirituality/faith that perpetuates violence?”
- ◆ “We need to confront the problem of suffering. This is spiritual. So deep-rooted in Christianity and Latino culture. We need to take apart [re-examine] ‘sacrifice,’ ‘martyr,’ and ‘suffering.’ Move leadership forward as well.”⁴
- ◆ “Get rid of ‘God is punishing us’ and ‘God demands that we suffer.’”
- ◆ “Develop spiritual strength and divine presence to help survivors find hope.”
- ◆ Regarding sexual violence, faith communities “have a great debt to society.”

Prayer Is an Important Beginning, and it Must Be Augmented with Compassionate Support and Practical Help

- ◆ “Faith institutions need to broaden their view and approach.”
- ◆ “We need a call to change.”
- ◆ “Speak up. Use prevention.”
- ◆ “We can get resources to people.”
- ◆ “We need to empower the confidence of survivors, to trust their own instincts and knowledge and affirm and explore their own background.”

4 Safe Havens staff members have often encountered struggles with theological themes such as sacrifice, suffering, forgiveness, divine punishment, and gender roles in their work with diverse faith communities and faith leaders. These theological tenets are often mis-interpreted to justify abuse, to prolong the time that survivors spend in an abusive relationship, and to blame survivors for the abuse. As a result, these are often barriers to safety experienced by survivors. Any faith or tradition can be both a resource for survivors and a barrier to safety.

- ◆ “Deacons listen and accompany and empower.”
- ◆ During the pandemic, “faith leaders have not been able to be present for the community as they are used to.”

Training and Resources Are Critical to Do this Work

- ◆ “If we [faith leaders] are going to work with victims, we need to train people to respond to these cases. We need ability and resources.”
- ◆ “We need step-by-step directions on how to support someone.”
- ◆ “We need support and training on domestic violence.”
- ◆ We need “people learning and building their capacity to appropriately respond to disclosure of domestic violence and trauma.”
- ◆ “There are not enough people with the right tools to listen and help.”
- ◆ We need to know how to “refer them [survivors] to [local] resources, talk about their needs, find out and try to meet their needs. Listening is important.” Local services may include bilingual/bicultural staff that can be helpful, so it’s important that mainstream DV organizations include Latin@ faith leaders in their community engagement efforts so that information about available services can get out in the Latin@ community.
- ◆ “Leaders need to know about community resources available.”
- ◆ “Listening is important.”

Resources by Latinos and for Latinos are Needed

- ◆ “Many Latina women see gender-based violence as common, to be expected, or natural.”
- ◆ “We need materials created by Latinos with knowledge and love for the community. The community must speak. Talk to them in their own language. We need a mixture of language and spiritual language.”
- ◆ The needed resources are “not a translation [of resources for another community] or a ‘second thought,’” but instead created by the Latino community and for the Latino community.

- ◆ “Tools, materials, and information are needed.”
- ◆ “There are not enough culturally responsive, bilingual providers.”
- ◆ “We should talk about vulnerability, power, thinking about OUR culture and OUR language. The latino community must always be at the table when decisions are made.”
- ◆ While resources specific to Latin@ communities are needed, it is at the same time important to highlight that Latin@ communities and peoples are diverse, encompassing many countries of origin, cultural traditions, races, languages, gender identities, sexual orientations, religions, and global influences. Some may identify as Latinos or “Latinx,” while others are “Afro Latinos.” Some may identify as “brown” or “people of color,” while others do not. Each unique history, tradition, narrative, and culture must be honored and respected. Often, faith leaders are experts in the norms, mores, and traditions of their local congregations and communities.

Faith Leaders Need to Grant Permission to Seek Safety

- ◆ “It’s important [for faith leaders] to recognize when you can’t do something [on your own].”
- ◆ Faith leaders need to communicate: “it’s OK to seek the help of a counselor or domestic and sexual violence programs.”
- ◆ “There is nothing wrong, no sin, in going to a counselor or a program.”
- ◆ “Sometimes the perpetrator says he is the only one she [the survivor] can talk to.”

Religious Leaders and Secular Programs Need to Build Partnerships

- ◆ “Religious leaders can be assisted in these situations by the secular program leaders. They don’t have to ‘go it alone.’”
- ◆ “We need to work together.”
- ◆ “We need more support groups. People speak from their hearts of their deep trauma and wounds, hidden wounds, in a support group. This can be talked about and healed.”

- ◆ “Disclosure of violence will not always happen with a DV agency or a faith community. One woman who had suffered physical harm came for financial assistance, but trauma in her life having to do with her husband was part of her story and one of the reasons for the financial instability.”

We Need to Take a Holistic, Culturally Grounded Approach that Recognizes that Lives are Complicated and Issues are Connected

- ◆ “We understand macho culture, the man is the one who gives orders, the woman obeys. That is the family and the world.”
- ◆ “Latino men are brainwashed. We ‘become a man’ when we lay with a woman [a prostitute] for the first time. Prostitution is rife on the internet. It is a ‘perpetrator factory.’”
- ◆ “If men are enjoying porn on screen, they are part and parcel of sex trafficking.”
- ◆ “Having access to resources for financial assistance is important.”
- ◆ “The need for emotional support is greater than the capacity to respond.”

We Need to Include Young Men and Whole Communities in the Solution

- ◆ “Educate young men to not be part of this [abuse and exploitation of women]. Educate generations before them also, abusers who have themselves been abused. They have absorbed victimhood from their own life and from previous generations.”
- ◆ “We have to work particularly with men, to teach them to be good fathers and husbands, and how we can help our generation and future generations.”
- ◆ “We need to clarify the roles of men who are helping to hold other men accountable. These men need training and resources as well. They could help other men who abuse ‘see the pattern’ and they can help to change the community’s norms.”

Emerging themes: Presently, there are not enough or no resources, materials, and learning tools by and for the Latin@ community. The community needs listening, empowerment, support groups, affirming cultural and experiential knowledge, and knowledge about available community resources. Education to stop use of pornography is needed. Prevention and education for the young is important. Long-term change is needed. The community needs a way to combine spiritual as well as secular help and to involve faith leaders and faith communities in community-driven solutions. It's important that community leaders and faith leaders speak up. Prevention programming for the whole congregation and community is needed.

Conclusion

The Listening Circle conversations confirm the real need for resources and support that are specifically designed by and for the Latin@ faith community. Because faith is so central, both to the survivor and to the wider community, the Listening Circle participants envision a working relationship between faith-based leaders and IPV advocates grounded in culturally affirming and responsive approaches. The role of faith leaders/communities in prevention was mentioned repeatedly as pivotal to long-term change. In addition, the role of faith leaders, faith communities, and men of faith in encouraging accountability and change for those who abuse was strongly emphasized. The role of faith communities in long-term social change to end IPV calls out for new, creative, and culturally grounded strategies. With this improved understanding of the strengths and needs within the Latin@ community in hand, Safe Havens and Esperanza United hope to build a foundation for resources and training that will enable faith leaders to better support Latin@ survivors of abuse and play a role in prevention, accountability, and long-term social change.