



**A call to action for  
culturally specific  
gender-based violence  
services for Indigenous  
Latin@ communities**



## Acknowledgement

This report was created in collaboration with the Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities and Esperanza United (formerly Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network). Our intent is to highlight the strengths and realities of our Indigenous Latin@ families and to inform the continued work that needs to be done to bring justice and equity to our community.

Suggested reference: Esperanza United. (2021) *A Call to Action for Culturally Specific Gender Based Violence Services for Latin@ Indigenous Communities.*

*Esperanza United has chosen to use “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people 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 all people make to our communities.*



# A call to action for culturally specific gender-based violence services for Indigenous Latin@ communities

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Esperanza United (formerly Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network), calls for equity in care and culturally responsive services for Indigenous Latin@ communities. This call to action examines the experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) among Indigenous Latin@s in the United States, the unique challenges in accessing care by Indigenous Latin@s, promising strategies in working with Indigenous communities, and recommendations for future work to address GBV among Indigenous communities.

## Experience of Indigenous Latin@ Indigenous communities in the United States

Indigenous people are the population that first lived on lands across North and South America but now experience marginalization and underrepresentation in modern society. The number of Indigenous Latinos is difficult to measure both in Latin America as well as in the United States (US). This is due to the racism Indigenous communities encounter and societal constructs. Latino is the term used in the US census to measure the number of people who originate or identify themselves as being from Latin America. Because the term Latino does not capture Indigenous identity, it has become a difficult task to paint a full picture of Indigenous populations originating from Latin America in the United States.

Some Indigenous people also avoid the label Indigenous due to longstanding experiences of oppression and racism. Many Indigenous populations across Latin America have experienced ethnic cleansing, a form of gendered violence. For instance in Guatemala, sexual violence was used as an attempt to extinguish the Maya Ixil as an ethnic group (Fulchiron, 2016). Many cases of continuous violence and discrimination have also been documented in Mexico with the Triqui Indigenous communities. While some countries have reconciliation initiatives to address injustices against Indigenous communities, Indigenous people continue to face inequities and lack of representation. Due to systemic displacement and violence, many are forced to migrate to the United States and other countries. The migration to the United States has also been documented as a traumatic and difficult transition. Once in the United States, Indigenous communities experience a lack of culturally specific services tailored to their experience. Due to long histories of racism, violence, and genocide against Indigenous people, systems and services must work to rebuild trust when working with these



populations. Finding few opportunities of creating a home in their country of origin, many opt to migrate to the United States.

## Access to gender-based violence services

Once in the United States, Indigenous communities experience a lack of culturally specific services tailored to their experience. Cultural background, traditions, beliefs, and migration experiences are key towards understanding how mainstream services are not effective when working with Indigenous populations. For instance, in Indigenous communities, it is common to live with extensive family. Many times, once women are married, they move in with their husband's family, which results in the man holding the power in the relationship. In many cases when women experience violence from their partner, they are also pressured from the household members and society to put up with the violence.

Latin@s seek help for GBV from informal places such as their family, friends, and community leaders (Alvarez and Fedlock 2018; Alvarez et al. 2016; Rizo and Macy 2011). Similarly, Indigenous Latin@s also turn to familial places for help with GBV. Trusting GBV services can be challenging for Indigenous women as there are limited places that provide culturally specific services that are tailored to their experience. This includes services that are trauma informed, understand their Indigenous culture and traditions, and offer advocacy in their native indigenous language.

Organizations face the challenge of finding interpreters, translators, and staff that are linguistically competent to accommodate over 560 Indigenous languages (The World Bank, 2015) from Latin America. Although some organizations have started initiatives to document the different languages, there are still no official forms of writing Indigenous languages. Even more, there are words that do not exist in the Indigenous language, presenting challenges to fully capture their lived experience.

## Promising practices

Despite the structural racism experienced by Indigenous populations, Indigenous groups have demonstrated resiliency and a desire to connect with their roots and collective values (Lopez, 2018). As a movement to learn more about their roots and connect to their Indigenous origin, Indigenous people have created initiatives to restore cultural knowledge through language and traditions. Protective factors identified among Latin@ communities include family support and elders instilling Indigenous principles through storytelling and fostering nonviolence and ethnic pride (Burnette, 2018). Due to language and literacy barrier, organizations have used dramatization, collages, drawing and image theatre to connect with their Indigenous communities.



Promotoras, also known as community health workers, play a key role in serving Indigenous communities. Promotoras are women from the community who work towards increasing community capacity and knowledge. Organizations such as Esperanza United partners with Latin@ promotoras to provide information on GBV to other Latin@s. Likewise, the Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities (CBDIO) employs Latin@s and Indigenous people from the community to inform and build capacity among the Indigenous communities about their rights.

CBDIO with over 23 year of experience has built a long-standing relationship with their Indigenous community. Strategies used to reach their Indigenous Latin@ communities include:

- Coordinating with employers to provide information on healthcare and their rights at the workplace. This will include flexibility in providing information such as sharing information during lunch hours.
- Having events and information sessions at locations convenient to the community such as schools, apartment parking lots, and common workplaces that are close to the community and do not require transportation.
- Offering services that engage the whole family.
- Providing information in their native language and having interpretation services.

## Next steps for practice, policy, and research

Esperanza United (formerly Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network) calls to action for Indigenous Latin@s to be acknowledged in receiving equity in their care for culturally and linguistically specific GBV services. The following are recommended next steps to be taken in practice, policy, and research:

### Practice

- Train Indigenous languages interpreters on gender-based violence.
- Hold spaces for cultural events and gatherings.
- Provide outreach and offer information on health services and enrollment as well as information on social programs.
- Provide access and training of technology.
- Train systems and services on culturally and linguistically responsive methods when serving Indigenous populations.



## Policy

- Increase advocacy around state budget, culturally and linguistically specific gender-based violence services, and immigration.
- Advocate for laws aimed at reducing sexual assault in workplaces.

## Research

- Research investigating best practices for working with Indigenous Latin@s.
- Build knowledge of need to inform best practices tailored to Indigenous women.

## References

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