

# Inter-Generational Transmission of Violence in Latino Families: The Role of Mothers in Navigating the Cycle of Abuse

By

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## Abstract

Latino children and youth are the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the United States. They are also unique in the sense that they experience mixed-status families in which one, or more, of their family members lack the proper authorization to live and work in the United States. Because of this mixed status, they face a distinctive form of family violence in which fear of deportation silences victims. This article explores the roles of mothers in experiencing and interrupting the inter-generational transmission of violence in Latino families in the United States. Based on interviews with eleven Latina women, the author discusses cases in which the roles of mothers either interrupt or contribute to the continuation of the inter-generational transmission of the cycle of violence. This piece explores the tensions between personal experiences with witnessing violence and the actions Latina mothers took in order to stop cycles of abuse and its outcomes for their own children. The author concludes with suggestions for future research that centers on the experiences of Latinos in order to reduce inter-generational trauma and transmission of violence in Latino communities.

**Keywords:** Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Latino families; inter-generational transmission of violence; breaking the cycle of abuse

## Introduction

Family violence is extremely common in Latino families living in the United States and yet little research focuses on this specific group. About one in three Latina women (34.4 %) will experience intimate partner violence (IPV) during her lifetime, and one in 12 Latinas (8.6%) has experienced IPV in the previous 12 months (Smith et al. 2017). Of deep concern is the inter-generational transmission of violence that perpetuates harm in Latino families. Though research on Latino families is methodologically challenging because of the diversity of the community, the various citizenship and immigration statuses of members, and the requirements for Spanish fluency on research teams, greater efforts must be made to understand the inter-generational transmission of violence in Latino families so that they can be safe and thrive. The author analyzes the experiences of 11 Latina women who had

experienced intimate partner violence in their families of origin as well as in their adult relationships. The analysis explores the flow of violence from one generation to the next as well as the agency that many mothers engaged in to interrupt this inter-generational transmission. The article concludes with suggestions for future research that centers on the experiences of Latinos in order to reduce inter-generational trauma and transmission of violence in Latino communities.

## Important Definitions, Statistics, and Literature

**Who are Latinos?** The U. S. Census uses the term “Hispanic,” however, “Latino/a” is considered by many as a self-identifying term for being from a Latin American country, meaning Mexico, as well as countries in Central and South America, and the Caribbean. For this reason, the term “Latina women” was used to identify the study participants and population. Nearly

one in four of the children and youth under the age of 18 in the U S are Latino. By 2050, this demographic is expected to increase to one in three youth (Esperanza United 2022b). Although 90% of Latino children and youth are United States-born citizens, about half have a parent who immigrated to the United States and one in four has a parent who is *not* in the U. S. legally (Esperanza United 2022b). Latino families are also disproportionately impacted by larger institutional structures and their inequities. Because of this reality, they are likely to experience the most common form of family abuse: intimate partner violence (IPV). Estimates are that at least one in four women living in the United States will be in an abusive relationship in her lifetime. According to Hattery & Smith (2020), as many as 50 percent of all women in the U. S.-- including many who will *never* live in an abusive relationship—will experience at least one abusive incident in their lifetimes.

**Abuse in Latino Families:** Latina women—particularly, those who are immigrants—have specific vulnerabilities to IPV that relate to intersections of gender, place, and socioeconomic status (Alvarez & Fedock 2016). A study of 2,000 Latinas found that 63.1% of women who identified as being victimized in their lifetime (i.e., interpersonal victimization such as stalking, physical assaults, weapon assaults, physical assaults in childhood, threats, sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, etc.) reported having experienced more than one victimization, with an average of 2.56 victimizations (Cuevas et al 2012). Among 362 Latinas seeking family planning services about half (51%) had experienced IPV and 34% reported reproductive coercion (Holliday 2017). In comparison to women of other racial or ethnic identities, Latina women have also been shown to have the *greatest* likelihood of being victims of intimate partner homicide (Alvarez & Fedock 2016).

**Barriers to Detection and Reporting:** Latina women face discrimination not only in terms of their gender and race but also their ability to be parents or mothers. Their identities are *invisibilized* and deemed unimportant in matters of fertility and maternal health care. In an attempt to escape oppression, this assumption could result in Latina women's rejection of pregnancy and motherhood entirely. For example, "Some women use sterilization as an 'element of resistance' against the constraints of patriarchy/female subordination which subjects them to double standards and makes them primarily responsible for their fertility, child-rearing,

and domestic work" (Lopez 1993). While avoiding motherhood can be an escape, failure to become a parent, to reproduce "properly," or losing a pregnancy are disproportionately policed and punished in these communities. Additionally, Latina women experience high rates of maternal mortality and negative maternal and child outcomes from physical violence during pregnancy (Hoyart 2023).

Barriers to reporting may include fear and lack of confidence in the police, shame, guilt, loyalty and/or fear of partners, fear of deportation, and previous experience with childhood victimization (Esperanza United 2022a). A survey conducted among nurses in the United States found that a majority of nurses acknowledge the growing epidemic of IPV. However, only 56% agreed that they were "adequately trained to recognize signs and symptoms of IPV," and 44% disagreed (DeBoer et al. 2013). This statistic demonstrates that prospectively about half of the nurses do not feel confident in their assessing a victim of IPV. Furthermore, nurses were asked to rank major risk factors regarding IPV. Nurses in the study correctly ranked poverty and addiction as major risk factors but they incorrectly ranked pregnancy above adolescence as a risk factor (DeBoer et al. 2013). In fact, adolescents are the group at highest risk for IPV. Some nurses relied on the demeanor of their patients to suggest the possibility of intimate partner violence (Robinson 2010). Others focus on their own feelings of frustration based on previous experiences working with a patient who returns to an abusive relationship and decide not to screen for IPV. However, these relationships are not always easy to leave as coercive tendencies and manipulation play a major role in why a woman stays in a relationship. Another major issue among nurse practitioners is a lack of training and education to ask proper questions about IPV. Although RNs in this study report that screening for IPV is an important part of their practice, the nurses may be screening on the basis of their *index of suspicion*, which is likely to be shaped by subjectivity as well as "personal knowledge base" (DeBoer et al. 2013). Due to the lack of education, awareness, and forms of burnout, victims of IPV do not have the support of medical professionals beyond fertility and maternal care.

Likewise, immigrant women face another barrier to reporting: their immigration status. Immigrant Latina survivors reported a decrease in the likelihood of calling the police due to heightened immigration enforcement policies and increased fear of deportation (Rodriguez et al. 2018). Latina survivors report that their immigration status is often used as a control mechanism to ensure they

do not leave their abusive partners (Reina et al. 2014). It is important to note that help-seeking behaviors are closely tied to the women's level of cultural competence and knowledge. Undocumented Latinas are often less aware of their legal options compared to documented Latinas. Latina survivors who have resided in the United States longer have more opportunities to learn about their rights to legal representation and services. Finally, Latina survivors are more likely to depend on family members and friends for help, rather than healthcare workers, clergy, and police (Alvarez & Fedock 2018).

**Barriers to Leaving Abusive Partners:** Interpersonal and socio-cultural influences such as gender, class, and cultural factors play a powerful role in abused women's decisions about whether or not to seek help from friends, family, or outside agencies (Liang et al. 2005). Kelly's (2009) research demonstrated the "mothering" side of being an abused woman. For example, a decision to leave the abuser, intended to ensure physical safety, *may result* in more danger to themselves (Fleury et al. 2000) and their children (Hardesty 2002) because violence often increases after separation from an abuser. Mothering was the most important aspect of these women's lives, a responsibility against which all of women's decisions and actions were weighed (Kelly 2009). Mothers and their children love and fear their abusers simultaneously, therefore, leaving can be lengthy and painful. Children become a predominant source of resilience for mothers to heal from intimate partner violence and strive to create a future without violence. Some women revealed an endless series of strategic decisions made as they lived in abusive situations, left abusers, and began the process of moving forward in life with their children. Several women were threatened with death or deportation and others realized remaining with their abuser caused their children more harm than good (Kelly 2009). The socioeconomic status of the victims/survivors is also an important consideration. A woman with more resources has more options but, if the violence is perceived to be intolerable, a woman with no means to escape the violent situation may find herself in an untenable psychological situation that requires creative solutions (Liang et al. 2005).

**Silent Witnesses to Violence:** Children who witness intimate partner violence may be particularly vulnerable to emotional and developmental issues. Because of an inability to understand the language of young children, adults may tend to deny the serious impact that witnessing violence will have on development,

assuming—or wishing—that young children will not understand and will forget what they have seen (Groves et al. 1993).

**Effects of Witnessing Parental Violence:** Parental violence here refers to violence perpetrated between intimate partners who are raising children (Gomez 2023:231). Children who witness intimate partner violence can experience trauma response symptoms. Forty-six percent (46%) of Latino preschool-aged children who were exposed to IPV also experienced PTSD symptoms such as re-experiencing the event – e. g., being upset at reminders of the event, repeating statements from the event, reenacting parts of the event – and heightened arousal – increased irritability, startling easily, and having trouble sleeping (Esperanza United 2022b).

School-aged children who witness IPV, are at an increased likelihood of developing maladaptive peer relations and experience greater difficulties in developing and maintaining friendships. They also have trouble concentrating in school and experience greater internalizing and externalizing symptoms than youth not exposed to IPV (Esperanza United 2022b). Adolescents who witness abuse may act out in negative ways, boys may become more aggressive in fighting with peers and parents, while girls are more likely to withdraw and experience depression. Furthermore, adolescents may engage in delinquent and risky behaviors, such as skipping school and using alcohol or drugs (Esperanza United 2022b).

The research in this article is situated in the theoretical frameworks of inter-generational trauma and inter-generational transmission of violence theory. Previous research has reported that children who grow up on abusive households are more likely to experience abuse in their adult relationships. Hattery & Smith (2020) document that women who grow up as silent witnesses to abuse are 50% more likely to experience partner violence than women who grow up in non-abusive households. Hattery (2008) and Hattery & Smith (2020) argue that girls who grow up as silent witnesses often seek adult partners who can "save" them from their abusive households, leaving them vulnerable to abuse in their adult, intimate relationships.

Stunningly, boys who are silent witnesses to abuse in their families of origin are three times more likely to grow up to perpetrate it (Ehrensaft et al. 2003). The inter-generational transmission of violence theory offers one explanation for this process. This theory hypothesizes that a propensity toward violence is transmitted from

parent to child (Hattery & Smith 2020). That is, the predisposition to be violent and abusive, especially the likelihood of perpetrating IPV, is passed on from one generation to another. These authors argue that inter-generational transmission of family violence is *learned not genetic*. The cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that is transmitted from one generation to the next occurs through socialization (Dass-Brailsford 2007; Rakoff et al. 1966). Socialization and modeling are mechanisms by which men teach their sons about women and the expected male-female roles/behavior. Rather than explicitly telling their sons to be physically aggressive and abusive, fathers and male role models reinforce misogynistic ideologies that women try to manipulate and control their partners and therefore, they need to be put in their place. And sometimes this requires violence. Men teach their sons how to be the “man of the house,” and the head of the household, and how to demand certain behaviors from their partners (Hattery & Smith 2020).

Some parents may use violence as a way to “correct” deviant behavior and resolve conflict. There is immense pressure for young men, both Black and Latino, to conform to certain standards of toughness and financial prowess – often by any means necessary (Smith 2008). By attempting to meet these standards, poor minority men often get themselves in trouble that ultimately leads to a run-in with the law. The machismo ethic becomes perpetuated by both men and women. Mattson & Ruiz (2005) argue that individuals in a relationship fail to develop conjointly as a couple because of differences in education, socioeconomic status, mutual friendships, and manner of thinking from the other person. Machismo was described by both men and women as influencing the occurrence and perpetuation of violence when seen by the man as a way of maintaining control over the woman (Mattson & Ruiz 2005). Latino men are expected to be strong, dominant, in control, and breadwinners of the family (Hattery & Smith 2020).

In families where there is violence, children with violent parents may not have the opportunity to learn healthy strategies such as negotiation, verbal reasoning, self-calming tactics, and active listening (Foshee et al. 1999) which are conducive to effective communication and conflict resolution. These types of behaviors are reinforced through direct and vicarious systems of rewards and punishments. According to Kalmuss (1984), family violence involves two models – generalized modeling and specific modeling. Generalized modeling occurs when aggression in

the childhood family is communicated through the acceptability between family members and, therefore, increases the likelihood of any form of family aggression in the next generation. This type of modeling does not necessarily involve a direct relationship between the types of aggression in first- and second-generation families (Kalmuss 1984). Specific modeling occurs when an individual reproduces the familial aggression they witnessed or experienced. An example of this includes machismo in Latino cultures and communities where young boys are taught toxic ideas of what it is to be a man and the activities, behaviors, and actions that reinforce violence as a solution. Children observe not only violent behavior but also emotional triggers for violence, circumstances of violence, and consequences of violence (Foshee et al. 1999). Social learning theory also considers how environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence how children learn and behave in a household where abuse is active. In other words, social learning theory posits that aggression is learned by observing the behavior of others (Foshee et al. 1999).

Family violence theories focus on the family as a unit composed of a set of complex relationships (Gomez et al. 2023). Because the risk for experiencing violence is not evenly spread across all families, those families in which both members of the couple grew up witnessing violence will have a significantly higher probability of repeating violence in the next generation than families in which only one member or neither member witnessed violence growing up (Hattery and Smith 2020). Finally, because women will likely experience multiple partners/romantic relationships during their lives whereas their children will most likely experience only one set of parents/guardians, children’s risk for violence is highly predictable—their parents are either abusive or they are not—whereas women’s risk for violence varies across the various partners they have in their lifetime (Hattery and Smith 2020).

Finally, IPV is viewed as acceptable (normalized) when tolerance of gender-based violence combines with cultural, and religious variables to increase risk factors, one of those being parental violence (Gomez et al. 2023).

**Research Question:** *How do Latina mothers who survive intimate partner violence navigate breaking inter-generational cycles of abuse and the inter-generational transmission of violence?*

## Methods and Sample

The data analyzed in this paper are a subset from a larger study (N = 33) that included Black, Latina, and white women who were partnered with Black men, and a small sub-sample of Black and white men. The sub-sample analyzed here comes from in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 11 Latina women impacted by intimate partner violence. These interviews were conducted between April and August of 2021 by the research team at a large, public university in the mid-Atlantic.

The sample for this study was a convenience sample. Latina women were recruited into the study through a local community agency that serves the wider Latina community. Specifically, fliers were hung in the community agency and posted on the organization's social media channels. All women who volunteered and met the study criteria were included. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format that allowed flexibility in responding to interviewees' stories and experiences.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Audio was recorded and instantly transcribed using the Spanish language transcription software Sonix. Transcripts were further refined and corrected after each interview. Each interviewer also took notes and recorded impressions during and after each interview. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and any details that could be used to identify a specific participant were either removed or changed in order to mask the participants' identity. All interviews were conducted, transcribed and coded in Spanish. Relevant passages were then translated into English for the benefit of the non-Spanish speaking members of the team.

Coding was influenced by grounded theory blending the strengths of both inductive and deductive reasoning by moving between each (Corbin & Strauss 2015). Coding was divided among two teams, one for the Spanish interviews and one for the English interviews; team members then compared codes across the two languages to ensure data integrity. Coders looked for trends in the interviews. Each coder was responsible for coding designated groups of codes for every interview to ensure inter-coder reliability. Interpretive coding of the data was utilized to "learn about how the subjects... view their social world and how these views fit into the larger frame of...these issues and interpretations" (Berg 2009).

## Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed three prominent themes: (1) children as silent witnesses to violence, (2) cycling in and out of abusive relationships, and (3) "I can do things better and differently." Though these themes were present in all 11 interviews with Spanish speaking participants, the specific cases and quotes selected to illustrate each theme were chosen because they were the most concise and best articulated the concept represented in the theme.

***Children as Silent Witnesses to Violence:*** There is a misconception that only witnessing physical violence can be traumatic. However, exposure to emotional and verbal abuse can have the same or more damaging outcomes. Because of this misconception, many mothers believed that as long as they were preventing their children from witnessing the physical abuse-- hits, slaps, punches, and use of weapons that they themselves were experiencing, they were preventing the child from experiencing trauma and limiting the inter-generational transmission of the violence.

### ***Interviewee #1: Chanel***

Chanel emigrated to the United States because there was no work and she wanted to be financially stable. She mentions the difference between the United States and Mexico in terms of family and affection. It is very common in the United States to find parents who love and show affection but according to Chanel, it's not like that in Mexico. She does not remember her father ever demonstrating love or emotional support. When her father did show up he was often intoxicated and became physically abusive towards her mom. She was eight years old when she first witnessed abuse, though she believes that because she went to sleep early, her parents didn't think she was aware of the situation happening.

Chanel met her abuser 18 years ago and he was a very good person, and he would even dedicate his weekend to spend time with her. This is in part what attracted her to him; he was so different from other men in her life, especially her father. After he began drinking, he started to engage in abusive behaviors, including insulting her and threatening her and also physically abusing her. Her partner even denied his youngest child because he said that Chanel was pregnant by someone else. She finally separated from her abuser when she caught him cheating through a text message that came in early in the morning. Despite attempting to shield her daughters

from her partner's abuse, she can see the impact of the silent witnessing on them, just as she experienced as a child.

*My daughter is a very skinny girl she suffers a lot of bullying and she never wants to leave. She always wants to be in her room she doesn't even want to go to school. If I try waking her up she'll go back to sleep. and tell her that she needs to go to school to please go to school cuz she needs to leave the house. She says no Mom they're always bullying me...she suffers from anxiety...*

As a result of witnessing the violence, Chanel's daughter attempted to commit suicide but was unsuccessful. She had to go through several rounds of therapy and still is.

*One time my daughter tried to commit suicide because she had seen violence since she was little. Thank God we took her to a rehabilitation center but she always saw and even said that she saw how her father would hit me.*

Chanel's biggest obstacle right now is helping heal her daughter and one of the approaches she's using is sending her daughter to summer camps and activities where she can at least socialize with people her own age and stay away from the house.

### **Interviewee #2: Jaime**

**Jaime's** interview illustrates the long-lasting impact of witnessing non-physical abuse as a child. Witnessing abuse when she was young affected her later in life and even influenced the kind of adult relationships she entered which turned violent.

Jaime immigrated to the United States in hopes of a better life for herself, her parents, and her siblings. She experienced severe poverty but her mother always made sure to fight and work hard for her kids. Her dad suffered from severe alcoholism and cared more about his friends than his family. Similar to Chanel's observations, Jaime says that there was a cultural misconception that dads should not show emotion or care for their kids' emotional health. At around 8 years old she recognized that she had to start working for herself, and by age 10, she was. Jaime says that she never witnessed physical violence between her parents, only verbal abuse.

Jaime says she never thought about the abuse her mother endured until she experienced it for herself. She knew of her abuser since they were young because they would play "together," and they also crossed the border

together. He had three kids from his previous marriage and the first incident of violence was when he slapped her in the car and then demanded that she cover up the bruise. During her pregnancy, he cheated on her and also abused her physically. She lived with his family and, as a result, she had to do a lot of the housework and she barely ate throughout her pregnancy since she was the last one to be taken care of and as a result, she weighed only 100 pounds during her pregnancy. Her sister-in-law would take her money as well as lie about everything that she was doing to get her in trouble with her brother, Jaime's husband. Jaime's mother ended up helping her move to New Jersey.

Jaime's ex-husband stalked her to New Jersey. He brought his daughters from his previous marriage with him to live with Jaime because he was moving in with another woman who did not want his kids around. This started the back-and-forth relationships between her, her ex-husband, and her ex-partner's girlfriend. He would come home and physically abuse her without any reason to do so. As a survival strategy she tried to "hide behind" her kids, but her abuser was not deterred and, as a result, her kids witnessed the abuse.

Eventually, she was unable to hide the abuse at work, either, and her supervisor wanted to call the police but Jamie begged her not to. Jaime was finally able to escape because her ex-partner was arrested for drug dealing and ended up being deported back to Mexico. She initiated another relationship where she endured neglect as well. Her "new" partner also had a history of domestic violence in his previous relationship and began abusing Jamie. She experienced mistreatment at the hospital and her son ended up having a severe disease and she experienced severe postpartum depression. She admitted to hating her baby and not wanting anything to do with her baby. Jaime's partner would leave her alone and he would not want anything to do with her. They are still together but their relationship is very one-sided and she feels like they're just together for the kids.

*Look, I had never thought about and reflected on all of the incidents in my childhood. But, my mom did suffer domestic abuse. She never thought of it as violence because it just wasn't physical. It was all verbal and subconsciously it did affect me but at the moment I hadn't noticed. How could I? How could it have affected me? I think I realized this when I started suffering from domestic violence. I ended up living with him and at this stage of my life I wouldn't do it again but at that moment I couldn't control myself. You're so scared that you don't want to be in the relationship but you don't know how to leave and I don't know if I would say I'm happy, but subconsciously everything that I witnessed with my parents has affected me. I had always thought it was just another moment in my childhood.*

Jaimé's experience is also illustrative of the second theme that emerged from the data: Women who witnessed domestic violence in their families of origin saw these patterns repeated as they cycled in and out of abusive intimate relationships as adults.

### **Cycling In and Out of Abusive Relationships**

As other scholars have noted, women who experience or witness abuse in their families of origin often initially escape their abusive childhoods with partners who seem, on the surface to be saviors, but who end up abusing them (Hattery 2008, 2009; Hattery & Smith 2020).

#### **Interviewee #3: Carolina**

Carolina experienced abuse when she was young. Her parents were both physically and emotionally abusive and, when they ended up separating, she was sent to live with other family members while her mother took her brothers to live with her. Carolina's mother experienced abuse and normalized it. She believed her way out was to get married and, eventually, she met the man who fathered her kids. He began mistreating her emotionally and also hit her while she was pregnant. He would not allow her to leave the house without his mother, even though he was routinely cheating on Carolina. His mother would always stay quiet and not interfere because she was also a victim of abuse. In fact, abuse was common on his side of the family. The men would abuse their wives, especially during pregnancy.

After Carolina gave birth to her youngest son, she decided she had had enough. When he was away on a work trip for three days, she took the opportunity to leave him. She eventually immigrated to the United States but had to leave her kids in Mexico to give them a better life. After she first arrived in the United States, she lived with her brother. Ultimately, he kicked her out because he believed that she was sleeping around with some co-workers. Carolina then moved to Pennsylvania. She lived in a communal home where she experienced sexual assault. After this happened, her brother reached out once again and told her that she could come to live with him in Maryland. There she had issues with her sister-in-law who would lie and make up false stories about Carolina. These stories resulted in her brother kicking her out and then bringing her back. She ended up telling her brother about all the infidelities that her sister-in-law was engaged in and, in retaliation, her sister-in-law attacked her with the machete.

After this incident took place, her brother kicked her out for the last time. Carolina then went to live with another man. She emphasized that this decision was *not* out of love but out of survival because she had nowhere else to go. This man forced her to engage in sexual relationships and verbally harassed her. Eventually, she met an American who wanted to be in a relationship with her. By that time, Carolina was very traumatized and wanted to take things as slow as possible.

*I remember that he would abuse me in front of his mother; but his mother would not say anything. She would not defend us because my mother-in-law also went through the same thing. Her husband hit her and would often come home drunk. It was a very hard situation. One time on one of my brothers-in-law physically beat his pregnant wife on the train. She was bleeding and ended up losing her baby.*

#### **Interviewee #4: Miriam**

Initially, Miriam experienced abuse at the hands of her mother who was an alcoholic and refused to take care of her children. Miriam began working at six years old in order to both stay away from her house and to start having some financial independence. She did have a good relationship with her father because he was very caring and believed she was his princess. She had to get in the middle of a lot of physical arguments between her parents because the only way her father would stop was because Miriam was caught in the middle.

*My parents would throw punches at each other and I had to be their mediator and intervene. Sometimes I would even get hit because I would get in the middle cuz I didn't want them to get hurt or hurt each other. My dad said I was his princess and that's the only reason he would stop, he would stop because of me. So, I always had to get in the middle so he wouldn't hit my mom.*

Miriam met her abusive partner when she was 18 years old. He helped her get a job. She says that she was very blinded by money and he would regularly buy her clothes and other material things. They ended up going out. Life was great for the first four years after her son was born. Their arguments and problems started because her abuser was always talking to his ex-girlfriends and would constantly cheat on Miriam. She only endured his abuse because she had nowhere else to go. Her family asked her what was the point of leaving and told her that she needed to endure his abuse and cheating. She mentioned an incident where she was experiencing postpartum depression and did not want to go to an event but her abuser forced her to go. She

said that she tried to ignore him and his taunts until his mother got involved and told him to just let it go. In response, he kicked Miriam and physically abused her. She ended up calling her family who called the police. However, [the police] said that they couldn't do anything. Her postpartum depression was so bad that she did not even want to look at her child. She called the police on her partner because she went to a party where he found her, hit her, and told her that she was supposed to be at home. She did not know English so she trusted her son to translate. However, her son did not translate what she was actually saying. He protected his father. Miriam had a hard time adjusting to being a single mom and dealing with her ex-partner who is trying to turn their kids against her. She says that she plans to go to court to have him pay child support for their children.

After all of the abuse these women experienced, it is difficult to imagine that any of them could see another path forward, a way to end the cycle. But some did, including Fernanda.

**Interviewee #5: Fernanda** says *“I can do things better and differently.”*

Although Fernanda experienced physical abuse at the hands of her mother, she still believes her childhood was beautiful. She began working at age 15 as a way of getting away from the abusive household in which she was raised. Fernanda is still trying to become financially independent. She met her abuser at a young age and ultimately left her little town because of her pregnancy. Her abuser was very possessive, very violent, and jealous. When she was five months pregnant, she threatened to abort her child because she could *not* take his physical abuse anymore. She immigrated to the United States in the hope of finding more stability.

Fernanda emphasized that she always experienced domestic violence but at the hands of her mother and as well as her partners. Unfortunately, her abuser immigrated with her, and she got pregnant a second time. Although he was supportive, she lost the baby. Fernanda said that her partner would go to canteens and bars. He was deported after neighbors called the police on an argument of theirs due to how loud it became. He was charged with domestic violence.

Initially, Fernanda wanted to go back to Mexico to be with the father of her children but she discovered that he was cheating on her. He ended up marrying someone else. Her next relationship was initiated through a friend that she and her ex-husband had in common.

This man was very loving and kind in the beginning but he ultimately started to be jealous. They would always argue and he would do things like leave her on the side of the road. When he was intoxicated, he would also physically abuse her, even while she was pregnant. His abuse during her pregnancy resulted in her being hospitalized. Later on, she learned that the physical abuse she endured “stunted” her baby’s development. She had to have a C-section. Fernanda and her partner argued shortly after the baby was delivered, while she was “postpartum.” This time, instead of taking the abuse, she ran and called the police. As a result, her partner was deported. He re-entered the country thinking that they were going to get back together but she refused. So, they became co-parents.

The turning point in this relationship was when he refused to feed their daughter because he was too tired and he believed that that feeding the child was her job. Fernanda experienced severe abuse even after they were separated. On many occasions, her abuser would show up unexpectedly at the house and demand to be let inside. On one occasion, he forced his way inside and began choking her. Fernanda believes he was trying to kill her once and for all. Her children tried to separate the two of them, but her abuser was too strong. She told the children to run and lock themselves in the car. When she was able to escape his grasp, she also ran to the car where she called 911. While the police were investigating, her abuser hid in the closet. The police called his number, and his phone began ringing in the closet! They arrested him but did not deport him because it was during COVID-19 when they had just released a lot of inmates. She does not know where he is now; but she says that she gets a lot of random calls and assumes they are from him. She says that she would rather live very secluded from the world.

*I am a mom now but I try to avoid being like my parents. Moms realize when they're harming their children and my mom harmed me in multiple ways. Now we have to educate our children but more as a community in a village. I don't know if my mom just wasn't thinking about what she did but you always remember the harm that you do to your children.*

## Discussion

For a variety of reasons, including their immigration status, the diversity of the Latino community, and the necessity of having Spanish speakers on research teams, the literature on family violence and inter-generational trauma, in particular in Latino families is understudied.



Based on interviews with 11 Latina women who experienced intimate partner violence, three themes of inter-generational transmission of trauma emerged: (1) the impact of non-physical violence on child witnesses of abuse, (2) cycling in and out of abusive relationships in adulthood, and (3) mothers' commitments to stopping the inter-generational transmission of the trauma.

Both Chanel and Jaime witnessed non-physical violence in their families of origin and both were able to articulate the impacts of that violence on their own adult relationships. Chanel is struggling to interrupt the transmission of that trauma into her own daughter's generation. Jaime notes that part of the difficulty of interrupting the cycle of trauma is the fact that the non-physical abuse her mother endured was never acknowledged and, thus, it was never addressed. She admitted that she never considered what her mother endured until she began to endure it in her own life. Jaime, like Carolina, seeks to escape the violence by leaving with a man who she views as her "savior." This experience is well-documented among white and Black women (Hattery 2008, 2009; Hattery & Smith 2020).

This finding extends our understanding of the cycling in and out of abusive relationships in adulthood in the Latino community. One important difference that this research reveals is the additional challenges to escaping abuse when doing so requires immigrating to another country. In Jaime's case, she had to immigrate from Mexico to the United States. Like so many people making this journey, immigrating with an abuser significantly exacerbates the vulnerability of women like Jaime and Carolina. In the midst of the extreme violence that these women reported, there is a glimmer of hope. First, despite the fact that it is well documented that immigrant women, especially those in the Latino community, often report that they fear seeking help from the police because they worry that their partners will be deported, in Jaime's case, her partner *was* deported. In Carolina's case, he would have been had it not been for COVID protocols. Thus, there is some evidence that deportation of an abusive partner can create the safer environment that some women need to escape violence. And, finally, some women, including Fernanda and Carolina, strive to interrupt the inter-generational transmission of violence by taking actions specifically to support their children, including obtaining therapy, as Carolina did for her daughter.

## CONCLUSION

The women interviewed in this small sub-sample had experienced the extremes of violence both in their families of origin and in their adult intimate relationships. Often, it was the normalizing of violence and the failure or reluctance to *name it*, especially non-physical violence, that impeded the women from seeking help and attempting to disrupt its inter-generational transmission.

Latina women and their partners who were silent witnesses to abuse in their families growing up, often found these patterns repeated in their adult relationships. Many factors contributed to this inter-generational transmission of violence, including failing to "name" the violence, seeking partners to escape who end up abusing them, as well as the challenges associated with immigrating and managing complex citizenship status in the United States context.

## Suggestions for Future Research

Journals that publish research on intimate partner violence include studies that span the globe. Yet, as this article shows, relatively little is known about the experiences of Latina women who seek safety from domestic violence inside the United States. As stated in *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Thernstrom et al. 1994), there are over 100 race/ethnic groups in America. Yet, to date, we know almost nothing about the experiences of 95% of those 100 groups as it pertains to their living with violence in intimate relationships, including the myriad sub-ethnic groups that exist in the highly diverse categories of both "Hispanic" and "Asian." It is clear from the results of this small study that much more research is needed in order to better understand the distinct processes of family violence, specifically the inter-generational transmission of violence in Latino communities.

The findings of this research make the case for expanding research on intimate partner violence and the inter-generational transmission of violence to a wider section of the Latino community, including people with varying immigrant statuses as well as those from different countries of origin.

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