

The Experiences of Utah Latinas

SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

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In the spring of 2022, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project** convened 11 community conversations with women of color in Utah, and this report summarizes what Latinas shared at two of these gatherings. Additional information can be found [here](#). This summary of select findings complements this [research snapshot](#).

MOST PRESSING ISSUES

- 1 Exclusion
- 2 Accessibility of resources
- 3 Safety
- 4 Health
- 5 Awareness of resources

EXCLUSION

Barriers to serving: Despite being willing to serve, undocumented women face barriers to community service because most organizations require documentation or English proficiency. One woman said, "The reason we haven't been participating as we should is we have not been welcomed." This inhibits skill and self-esteem building.

Minority-majority not served: Hispanic families are often not consulted about their needs and are not placed in decision-making positions even in minority-majority school districts. One participant explained, "The lack of intentionality to deliver resources that are culturally relevant is frustrating. The access Black and Brown parents are denied directly impacts our children." For example, participants believed that if better educational options (e.g., full-time kindergarten) were affordable and accessible, they could better thrive and give back. One participant said, "If you help out a family, you help out a whole community. Latino families want to contribute to their community; they don't want to take." Instead, their children start school behind their peers, perpetuating inequality.

Community as empowerment: Those who have overcome barriers can become mentors and guides, teaching others to understand their rights and advocate for themselves. For example, if someone were treated unfairly at work, fear of deportation may silence them. One woman stated, "It's important that we don't allow ourselves to

get defined by our status, that we stand on our own regardless and be heard."

ACCESSIBILITY OF RESOURCES

Language as a barrier: Women often feel unsupported and misunderstood by caseworkers in state agencies due to lack of language support. One participant stated, "Case workers and the client get frustrated. It feels like the system is against them." While interpreters may have linguistic fluency, they may not be adept in navigation of systems and agencies.

Distrust as a barrier: Participants described a fear of government as a barrier to accessing services. One woman said, "Sometimes we don't get the support and kindness we need because they don't realize the generational fear of government. It's especially hard for our women who already think they're less than, making it even harder to get out of situations." Culturally attuned caseworkers can establish trust, empowering participants to communicate their needs openly and confidently.

Political access: Participants describe difficulty accessing elected officials. One said, "The hardest part is for me as a woman to be heard. I want people to understand our culture, right? It has been a struggle finding congresspeople to give me that respect by scheduling a meeting with me. These are our rights." A leader in the majority-minority school system (notably, the only person of

color) underscored the need for Latinas and families of color to raise their voices to leaders: "It's so important that we hear from our Latino parents, grandparents, single parents, and blended families."

Grandparent experience: Grandparents who are children's guardians should receive empathy and credibility from school leaders so interventions can be implemented effectively. These children are often facing intergenerational trauma and abandonment issues, and thus not believed. One grandmother stated, "In 11th grade, they finally listened, and he got an IEP." Another grandparent advocating for a dyslexic grandchild said, "I've asked the school for help, and they think I'm crazy. I don't know what to do or how to help her."

SAFETY

Prevalence of domestic violence: Domestic violence is another major issue for Latinas. Participants provided many stories of themselves or their mothers escaping violence. One received mental health resources and job training at a local shelter that helped her land a great job. However, a participant who helps women in the community said, "We need more help in ensuring these women achieve independence, that they don't need to keep living with the man because they don't know how to survive or pay bills." Women also described intergenerational effects of domestic violence, such as diminished self-worth.



Domestic violence of undocumented:

Undocumented, Spanish-speaking women are particularly powerless if they are kicked out by their documented husbands. Women describe instances where the police were called but believed the husband. She said, "The police have to learn, that even if we are Latinas, we have rights. We are not whining, we just want respect, and we need help." One participant surveyed undocumented women about domestic violence, and the key issue—above the need for resources and safety—was extreme isolation "because we are so marginalized; we don't have documentation. How are you going to show up for me when I always show up to prove who I am?"

HEALTH

Mental health: Improved intergenerational communication about mental health is crucial. One participant stated, "As Latinas, we don't talk about this issue, we have to be tough. We don't know how to help our little ones." Being uninsured is a major barrier, as is finding culturally-aware providers. For insured people, the general affordability of therapy and medications may remain an issue. Postpartum depression is a prevailing concern, and immigrant mothers are unaware of community-led services. Some states cover doulas via Medicaid due to the long-term societal benefits; one doula participant noted, "It is so important to start early, because they are raising the next generation." Another summarized, "If we are happy, we are better able to take care of each other and we won't need as many resources as people think."

Developmental disabilities: Latinas with autism struggle to be diagnosed due to stereotypes. One woman stated, "When I was angry or feisty, I was really struggling with overstimulation and executive dysfunction. Because our culture is bright and we speak with passion and movement, no one suspected I was autistic." Children of color are instead often diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder, a systemic bias that is slowly improving through improved diagnostic criteria. Also, law enforcement needs training to better understand people with disabilities, where misinterpreting autism as aggressive or shady may have different consequences for people of color.

Lack of government intentionality:

Participants lamented that although government has available mental health resources and community health workers, few budgetary or outreach efforts have been made to include the Hispanic population. One woman stated, "It's because the people in power have no connection to our culture, way of life, how we consume media or share information. We are not welcomed nor involved in majority White spaces where decisions are made."

AWARENESS OF RESOURCES

Achieving dreams is possible: Participants want women to know that even if they are undocumented and do not speak English, community resources exist to help them follow their passions. One said, "You can be more than staying home to watch the

grandkids." They need information on how to get a loan or start a business without a Social Security Number. As one attendee said, "We want to open doors to more women like us, who will then want to help other women. The only way we break through barriers is if people see themselves in the people serving them." There needs to be a concerted effort to bridge awareness gaps and organization silos.

Support what is working: Participants have founded organizations that successfully meet needs, often free of charge. Presently, they rely mostly on sponsorships but need reliable funding. One participant started a nonprofit that offers training and resources to up to 300 women a month, including food boxes, shoes, clothing, and classes. Women who still need the services a year later receive more in-depth help, such as job training and English learning. She also helps find shelter for women experiencing domestic violence and said of her clients, "99% are undocumented; they need a lot of help."

This group was convened by:

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ACTION ITEMS FROM PARTICIPANTS

- Conduct relevant research in areas such as domestic violence among undocumented women to generate policy suggestions and implementations.
- Ensure the Hispanic community has a seat at the decision-making table.
- Fund organizations with a proven track record of helping women.
- Fund outreach efforts for resource awareness.
- Latinos with learning disabilities can be seen as threatening to law enforcement; police need particular training to identify these traits and diffuse rather than escalate encounters.
- Offer better language and cultural support at state agencies, particularly caseworkers from their culture.
- Provide undocumented women ways to volunteer and serve.
- Provide a domestic violence shelter and housing for undocumented, Spanish-speaking women; train police to assist people in their situation.
- Provide access to mental health care (affordable, culturally relevant, hours beyond 9–5).