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## How Women Navigate Safety In the Dominican Bateyes

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How Women Navigate Safety  
In the Dominican Bateyes

A Thesis  
Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts

By  
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June, 2019

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## **Biography**

The author was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, April 21, 1994. She graduated from St. Ursula Academy, in Cincinnati. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Notre Dame in 2012.

## Table of Contents

Thesis Committee.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Biography.....	iii
List of Tables.....	v
Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Theoretical Frameworks.....	5
Intersectionality.....	5
Levels of Violence.....	6
Help-seeking.....	11
Rationale.....	15
Statement of Research Question.....	16
Methodology.....	17
Participants.....	17
Measures.....	19
Data Analysis.....	20
Results.....	22
Experiences with ethnic discrimination.....	22
Childhood experiences.....	23
Adult Experiences.....	29
Negotiating Needs.....	37
Help-seeking.....	46
Discussion.....	52
Limitations and Future Directions.....	58

Conclusion.....	60
Appendix A: Participant Demographics.....	62
Appendix B: Definitions of Codes Used.....	63
References.....	65

**List of Tables**

Table 1. Sources of support among participants.....	36
Table 2. Help-seeking by type and entity.....	48



## **Abstract**

Research has demonstrated that individuals of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic are at high risk of violence and experience multiple levels of structural oppression. However, less research exists specifically for women of Haitian descent, who are at unique risk of violence due to the complex political history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as well as structural and gendered violence. I use frameworks of socio-ecological systems, intersectionality, structured violence, and gendered violence to consider how women of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic construct safety and prioritize different needs for their survival. I used thematic analysis to analyze life history interviews of women who had married at least once and who endorsed experiencing violence in their lives. Analysis demonstrated that women navigate a variety of informal supports primarily with other women to address different needs, including material, emotional, and interpersonal issues.

## Introduction

A long history of migration exists within Latin America (LA) and the Caribbean. The Dominican Republic (DR) and Haiti represent one example of regional migration within LA. The two countries have a complex and tenuous history that dates back to the colonial era in which the two countries were under different European rules, the DR being a colony of Spain and Haiti being a colony of France (COHA, 2011; Howard, 2001). Borders are porous between the DR and Haiti and a substantial percentage of crossings between the two countries are not officially documented, making it difficult to ascertain real migration numbers (Castillo, 2016; COHA, 2011; Howard, 2001; Wilhems, 1994). Population estimate of individuals of Haitian descent living in the DR range from two hundred thousand to two million, with higher numbers often cited by Dominicans who resist any recognition of people of Haitian descent as citizens (COHA, 2011, Howard, 2001; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004).

Generally, Haitian migrants to the DR seek work in a few key industries. Prior to the late 1980s Haitian migrants were mainly employed in agriculture, most often as seasonal cane cutters in the sugar industry. Communities called *bateyes* were constructed by sugar companies on the outskirts of cane fields to house this workforce, though there have always been permanent residents of the *bateyes* (Howard, 2001; Martinez, 1995; Wilhems, 1994; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). Haitian sugarcane workers were viewed both as necessary, so that Dominicans would not have to engage in the demeaning and dangerous job of cane cutting, and as invaders responsible for displacing Dominican workers, similar to the anti-immigrant narratives in the United States targeting Mexican migrants (Bartlett, Jayaram, & Bonhomme, 2011; Gross, 2007; Howard, 2001). However, with the decline of the sugar industry, more migrant workers are engaged in other agricultural industries and increasingly in the construction industry, domestic

service and other informal sectors of the Dominican economy (IMF, 2013). Immigrants of Haitian descent are unprotected legally, and often find exploitative work as their only options (Castillo, 2016; COHA, 2011; Petrozziello, 2012; Wilhems, 1994). This legacy of vulnerability often gets passed down to children born in the Dominican Republic (Castillo, 2016; COHA, 2011; Petrozziello, 2012; Wilhems, 1994).

Anti-Haitianism in the DR is often understood to have developed as a cultural ideology during the reign of Rafael Trujillo, who ordered a widespread massacre of Haitians in 1937 and who continued to use anti-Haitianism in his cult of personality before assassination (COHA, 2011; Howard, 2001; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). Anti-Haitianism became an essential cultural aspect in the DR when Trujillo and other leaders determined that distrust and rejection of Haitians could be used to politically unify Dominican citizens against a perceived common enemy, manipulating citizens by pushing the fear of military occupation or invasion from Haiti to solidify a strong sense of Dominican identity (COHA, 2011; Howard, 2001; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). Differentiating this Dominican identity from Haitian identity then became an important cultural aim, and Dominican politicians attempted to emphasize Spanish, Christian, and white cultural connections, while creating a narrative of Haitians being African, pagan, and black (COHA, 2011; Howard, 2001; Wigginton, 2010). Despite the violence and anti-Haitian views in the Dominican Republic, many workers still migrate because of economic necessity, given that the DR is economically more secure compared to Haiti (Frankema & Mase, 2014; Martinez, 1995). Today, many people of Haitian descent live in the *bateyes* of the DR, which are segregated from other neighborhoods and have poor infrastructure, severely limiting access to transportation, education, and healthcare, despite environmental health risks present in these constructed neighborhoods (Simmons, 2010). There

have been some claims by the Dominican government toward improving conditions for those of Haitian descent, mainly in response to international treaties and outer pressures regarding education rights (Kim, 2013). However, recent legal changes have mainly negatively affected Dominicans of Haitian descent, such as the 2013 Supreme Court decision to retroactively strip citizenship from anyone whose parents immigrated to the DR from Haiti after 1928, which led to large scale deportations of individuals of Haitian descent (Amnesty International, 2016; Bartlett, Jayaram, & Bonhomme, 2011; El Nuevo Dia, 2017; Gavigan, 1996; Rojas, 2013; Wigginton, 2010; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004).

Women of Haitian descent in the DR experience unique discrimination that intersects with racialized anti-Haitianism and misogyny (Howard, 2001; Petrozziello & Wooding, 2013; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). Images of Haitian women in Dominican media tend to follow stereotypical images of black women; overtly negative narratives perpetuate stereotypes of these women as burdens upon both Dominican and Haitian men, while more benevolent misogynoir narratives portray these women as long-suffering mothers or tragic wives of migrant workers (Aymer, 2011; Collins, 2000; Howard, 2001; Matibag, 2003; Petrozziello & Wooding, 2013; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). Dominican poetry and fiction have historically employed sexually dehumanizing images of Haitian women as primal and overly sexual beings without agency; this cultural narrative may negatively affect women's opportunities for employment as well as leave them vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse due to perceptions of their sexuality (Aymer, 2011; Bueno & Henderson, 2017; Howard, 2001).

Violence against women in the DR is significant and chronic; the DR has the highest rate of femicide in LA and the Caribbean, and the 6th highest in the world (Amnesty International, 2012; Bueno & Henderson, 2017). In some surveys, 50% of women living in the DR have

reported experiencing some form of physical or emotional violence at the hands of a domestic partner, and a woman is killed every two days in the DR (Acevedo, 2010; Bueno & Henderson, 2017). This may seem less severe than, for example, the United States, in which three women are killed every day, but contextually, the United States population is approximately 30 times that of the DR (Datos Macros, 2016; National Organization for Women; United States Census). There is a lack of formal supports and organizations to combat gender-based violence in the DR, and professionals in fields such as criminal justice and healthcare are lack training and resources to adequately service cases with gendered violence (Amnesty International, 2012). Haitian women living in the DR or in Haiti are at great risk of sexual and intimate partner violence similar to Dominican women, with additional risk compounded by the inability to trust government agents due to lack of documentation and general lack of cultural competency in formal institutions (Anderson, 2011; Latta & Goodman, 2005; Petrozziello & Wooding, 2013; Small, et al, 2008).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

**Intersectionality.** Given the complexity of experiencing marginalization due to gender, race, class, and documentation status, any examination of women in the *bateyes* must adopt an intersectional framework, which posits that there are multiple dimensions of inequality and that different types of systemic discrimination are employed against multiple people based on dimensions of difference (Grzanka, 2014). Intersectionality as a theory is inherently political; it is not meant simply as a framework to understand different experiences, but requires a movement toward systemic change (Grzanka, 2014). Intersectional scholars note how often experiences of women who are multiply marginalized are overlooked or rejected in feminist research, with the false assumption that feminist theory that applies to specifically privileged women would subsequently be relevant for all women (Collins, 2000; Grzanka, 2014).

Specifically, Latina scholars have argued that women's liberation in Latin America is necessarily intertwined with issues of race, class, and specific issues of *machismo* and *marianismo* in Latin America (Kuppers, 1994). Some researchers have suggested that focus on working class Caribbean women creates an image of dependence; however, working class women have been overlooked both by theorists examining working class individuals as well as by feminist scholars who have primarily focused on first-world women (Barriteau & Ramirez, 2004; French & James, 1999). In particular, research on the *bateyes* and anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic does not typically focus on women's experiences, nor does it provide a comprehensive image of the violence these women experience in their daily lives (Martinez, 1995; Wilhems, 1994).

**Levels of violence.** The historical context of these countries' relationship and the situation of those of Haitian descent living in the Dominican Republic is essential to understanding the modern issues at hand. The violence and marginalization that these women experience take place in a series of interconnected levels that can be understood in terms of the socio-ecological model (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002; Petrozziello, Hintzen, & Gonzalez Diaz, 2014). The socio-ecological model posits multiple levels of environments that affect and shape experiences, as specific as the individual, and then branching out to include macro-level environments such as culture (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). The social-ecological model examines how different settings may influence risk of violence: the *societal* level examines broad social factors and cultural norms that permit violence, as well as structures in place that maintain inequalities; the *community* level examines how contexts in one's life may involve certain influences and environments that affect risk of violence; the *relationship* level examines how specific interpersonal relationships can develop into violence; the *individual* level examines how one's individual characteristics may increase chance of violence (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). The

intersecting identities of these women affects their experiences at each level, and the influence of, for example, their ethnic identity cannot be separated from their gender, or vice versa (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002; Grzanka, 2014). By concretely examining the risks and protective aspects at various levels of these women's lives, we can better understand the development of violence or marginalization in their experiences.

Given the framework of the ecological model, multiple levels of violence must also be considered, at the individual, relationship, community, and societal level. For the purpose of this study, I will mainly focus on the relationship level, while also acknowledging how contextual factors like structural violence influence interpersonal relationships. Structural violence as a whole refers to violence that focuses on establishing, maintaining, and extending the hierarchical ordering of human beings in societies, which leads to interpersonal, state, and community violence (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998; Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001). Theorists pose that capitalism essentially creates structural violence, particularly between those who labor and those who sell this labor (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). Structural violence creates and maintains systems of inequality and limits both personal and communal freedoms, both of which lead to and are caused by further violence (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). Structural or state violence is often not viewed as violent by legal standards, as it is enacted through state officials, and is instead seen as protective or defensive, which is why police and other state officials are said to be "maintaining peace" (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). However, even if one adopts this perspective, the hierarchies created by structural violence still encourage and perpetuate interpersonal violence; unequal distribution of resources, for example, can lead to higher competition and risk of violence for survival (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). In social contexts wherein one can gain power through violence, either those who are higher in a hierarchy or those who are lower may engage in

violent behavior as a part of the system in order to gain or maintain power (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). Put in the context of our current study, for example, those of Haitian descent experience structural violence in their lack of infrastructure in their communities, denial of documentation, and lack of legal rights (Castillo, 2016; COHA, 2011; Iadicola & Shupe, 1998; Petrozziello, 2012; Wilhems, 1994). Those of Dominican descent serving as their own agents rather than of the Dominican government may still act in a way influenced by this structural violence, such as targeting those of Haitian descent for assault given that the victim may be unable to seek legal help (Castillo, 2016; COHA, 2011; Iadicola & Shupe, 1998; Petrozziello, 2012; Wilhems, 1994).

The societal level and relationship level of the ecological model are linked through constructions of structural violence given that interpersonal gendered violence is often constructed as one manifestation of structural patriarchy (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2008; Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). Specifically, the motivation for sexual assault indicates that gendered violence is not abnormal or disordered behavior (as has historically been argued in research on gendered violence), but rather, violence takes to an extreme what is considered culturally normative behavior from men: dominance over and disregard for women (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). The societal impact of structural misogyny and normalization of misogyny in interpersonal relationships create interconnected risk for women; for example, economic dependence created by gendered inequality means that women cannot leave their abusive partners, but women having a higher SES than their partners can also be an impetus for partners to re-establish dominance and control (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). Furthermore, violence that is addressed as legally and morally wrong is traditionally understood as being public, and so a supposedly



private form of violence such as domestic abuse can be perpetuated by a lack of judicial structures that provide resources for survivors (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998; Liang et al, 2005).

In terms of “private” violence, intimate partner violence (IPV) is largely defined as a cycle of systematic violence enacted upon one intimate partner (such as a spouse or other significant other) by another (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). There are a number of risk factors associated with IPV such as low or irregular income, female gender, rural communities, ethnic minority status, high age differences between partners, early dating history, and being of reproductive age, and IPV is also associated with negative physical and mental health outcomes (Buesa & Calvete, 2013; Graham, Kim, & Fisher, 2012; Gustafsson & Cox, 2015; Hunt, Martens, & Belcher, 2011; Iadicola & Shupe, 1998; O’Leary, Tintle, & Bromet, 2014; Pandey, Dutt, & Banerjee, 2009; Peters, Shackelford, & Buss, 2002). Early research on intimate partner violence focused on individual factors, which at times led to victim blaming and providing excuses for abusive behaviors or systems (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998). However, some research on individual risk factors is useful in conceptualizing IPV; for example, substance use, childhood trauma related to IPV, and social learning about gender roles can contribute to violent behavior along with systems of patriarchal violence that enforce unequal gender relations (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998; O’Leary, Tintle, Bromet, 2014; Peters, Shackelford, & Buss, 2002). More recent research focuses on structures that maintain gendered violence, as IPV is a largely gendered issue, although it can occur between partners of any gender (Kennedy et al, 2012; Lucea et al, 2013).

The interconnectedness of societal misogyny and interpersonal gendered violence may manifest in unique ways for women of Haitian descent in the DR, and so the ways in which women navigate these experiences may be unique as well. Gendered violence in LA is typically

attributed to *machismo*, a cultural phenomenon surrounding gender roles in which men's position is that of power and impenetrability (Wies, 2017). In *machismo* culture, women are generally expected to submit to a male head of the household, with the assumption that this head of household can provide for the family (Bueno & Henderson, 2017; Howard, 2001; Wies, 2017). When considering how *machismo* creates systems of risk for gender violence, a model of male backlash may be most appropriate for women of Haitian descent in the DR (Bueno & Henderson, 2017). The male backlash model posits that men use intimate partner violence to exert control over partners in reaction to perceptions of threat to their position as the male head of the household, meaning that risk is increased for women with incomes higher than their partners, or whose partners' economic careers are in jeopardy (Bueno & Henderson, 2017). This model is seen as especially relevant in contexts wherein men's position and power is limited due to systemic factors including racism and classism, such that women in these men's emotional reaction to disempowerment may lead to violence against women in their lives in order to reassert power (Bueno & Henderson, 2017). In the DR, this theory has been shown to better predict sexual intimate partner violence, and intimate violence toward low-income women, which would likely include women of Haitian descent, who experience poverty at high levels in the DR (Bueno & Henderson, 2017; Petrozziello & Wooding, 2013). Historically, connections have been drawn between violence and Latino class oppression that put women at a unique risk, but Tinsman (2012) cautions against this pathway, as it does not consider *machismo* or how violence is specifically carried out against women, not randomly. Thus, the male backlash model must be considered in the context of cultural *machismo*, systemic misogyny, and class oppression as they also intersectionally affect women. Otherwise, this model may be

misinterpreted as purely defensive or justifiable behavior rather than a representation of systems committing violence upon multiple people, with women as the ultimate targets.

**Help-seeking.** An essential aspect of studying intimate partner violence and other gendered violence is considering help-seeking and safety planning behaviors (Evans & Feder, 2014; Iverson, et al, 2013). Help-seeking as a broad concept refers to the process by which one seeks out resources to address self-defined needs, though existing literature varies in terms of what must occur to necessarily constitute help-seeking (Davanzo et al, 2012; Kennedy, et al, 2012; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008; Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). Help may be sought out for experiences of violence, as well as health or mental health needs, financial or other resources, or general advice from others (Davanzo, et al, 2012; Kennedy et al, 2012; Woodward et al, 2010). Help-seeking itself is affected by many factors; those who are ethnic minorities in communities with fewer resources are both at higher risk for violence and are also more likely to go without any treatment, due to lack of resources, distrust of formal institutions, and cultural pressures to maintain the family (Fleury, Sullivan, Bybee, & Davidson, 1998; Kennedy et al, 2012; Reina & Lohman, 2015; Sabina, Cuevas, & Lannen, 2014; Sulak, Saxon, & Fearon, 2014).

Help-seeking is a key aspect of intimate violence research given that support is a major protective factor for women experiencing IPV (Coker et al, 2012; Liang et al, 2005). IPV is associated with multiple risks for victims, including mental and physical health problems, substance use, suicide, homicide, and re-victimization (Cho et al, 2017; Coker et al, 2012; Liang et al, 2005). Help-seeking behaviors can protect against some of these outcomes, although it may not always be as protective in the face of severe and chronic abuse, wherein women may use more private strategies (Coker et al, 2012; Liang et al, 2005; Overstreet, 2013). This

subsequently means that lack of help-seeking behaviors can exacerbate outcomes, particularly mental health problems (Liefland, Roberts, Ford, & Stevens, 2014).

A good deal of research on intimate violence has focused on western contexts, often to determine the barriers that prevent individuals from seeking formal help (Sulak, Saxon, & Fearon, 2014). Formal help-seeking generally refers to reporting to or seeking resources from more formal institutions, such as police or state officials, charities and centers, medical or mental health professionals, social services, or other professionals who have an established role in providing resources (Brown, et al, 2014; Davanzo, et al, 2012; Liang et al, 2005; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008; Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). This type of research may not account for the realities of many women's lives, where there are extremely limited resources and protections available, and institutions are just as implicated in violence as individuals (Lucea et al, 2013; Petrozziello & Wooding, 2013). However, there may be some overarching factors that are very similar or exacerbated in terms of reluctance to seek help for more marginalized women, including violent reaction from one's partner, loss of financial or social resources, distrust of police, rejection from family or friends, being disbelieved, feelings of self-blame or guilt, immigration status, as well as factors such as the severity and frequency of the violence (Cho, Shamrova, Han, & Levchenko, 2017; Fleury, Sullivan, Bybee, & Davidson, 1998; Hyman, Forte, Mont, Romans, & Cohen, 2006; Liang et al, 2005; Reina & Lohman, 2015; Sabina, Cuevas, & Lannen, 2014; Sulak, Saxon, & Fearon, 2014). In the U.S. context, some have argued for police reporting as a specific form of help-seeking to be promoted among Latina women, which may serve as an alternative to self-advocacy on which some Latina women have been shown to rely (Cuevas, Bell, & Sabina, 2014; Mookerjee, Ceruli, Fernandez, & Chin, 2015). This creates some question about whether institutions, community resources, or interpersonal relationships are the

primary mode through which Latina and Caribbean women seek help, depending on context. Specific work on seeking out resources by Haitian women or in the broader context of the Caribbean and Latin America can potentially inform how these women specifically may engage in help-seeking. In regards to help-seeking for issues related to healthcare as well as violence, women of Haitian descent have reported that finances and lack of cultural sensitivity are particular barriers for seeking formal help (Liang et al, 2005; White et al, 2006).

Research has determine another set of factors affecting willingness to engage in formal help-seeking, wherein formal help-seeking is seen as a last resort (Liang et al, 2005; Spencer, Shahrouri, Halasa, Khalaf, & Clark, 2014). Due to a variety of reasons, women may only seek formal help if they have exhausted personal and interpersonal resources, and if they believe that the violence will not stop otherwise (Liang et al, 2005; Spencer et al, 2014). For example, cultural and social norms of privacy, maintaining family systems, desire to protect perpetrator and family reputations, and IPV stigma may necessitate that initial intervention to address IPV should come from within an extended family structure (Liang et al, 2005; Petersen, Moracco, Goldstein, & Clark, 2004; Spencer et al, 2014). Even women who may not feel comfortable working within their families due to past handling of violent relationships may still prefer to first try to resolve IPV personally or through support from friends, either to maintain privacy or out of worry regarding anticipated stigma (Liang et al, 2005; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Spencer et al, 2014). The reliance on informal support by many women, particularly those of African American, Caribbean, and Latin American descent, has been demonstrated repeatedly in research, including for women of Haitian descent in the DR (Estrada Pineda, Herrero Olaizola, & Rodriguez Diaz, 2012; Evans & Feder, 2014; Flicker et al, 2011; Jansen & Millan, 1991; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006; Sosulski & Woodward, 2013; White et al,

2006). Informal support essentially refers to resources or help provided outside of formal structures, such as from family, friends, colleagues, or other individuals not working as professionals (Liang et al, 2005). Some debate in the literature exists whether religious organizations function as formal or informal support. Women of color in particular may primarily rely on informal support because of greater accessibility, but this may bring additional burdens of navigating the attitudes of family, friends, and community members toward abuse, public perception and blame, and the responsibility to maintain the image of a positive family (Evans & Feder, 2014; Morrison et al, 2006; Rasool, 2015). If informal networks are encouraging of help-seeking and safety planning, individuals may be more likely to seek out formal support as well, though this may not be relevant for populations with legal barriers to formal support (Pullen, Perry, & Oser, 2014). Disparities in help-seeking literature generally indicate that women of color are less likely to seek out help for IPV, though multiple factors must be considered in this, as income, immigrant status, age, marital status, and other individual and structural influences may affect help-seeking behaviors (Hyman et al, 2006).

At times, efforts to increase help-seeking have simply been attempts to build trust between survivors and institutions or connect individuals to formal resources, due to the possible protective benefits of formal help, as well as the potential inadequacy of some informal help, which may not always provide resources for physical safety (Randell, Bledsoe, Shroff, & Pierce, 2012). However, this approach may fail to acknowledge the real risks of deportation or violence for marginalized women at the hands of formal institutions (Reina & Lohman, 2015; Reina, Lohman, & Maldonado, 2013; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). In particular, when state violence exists against a population, such as the structural violence against those of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, agents of institutions may engage in interpersonal (often sexual) violence

against minority populations, which would further alienate women from safety seeking behaviors (Goett, 2015). Even with positive relationships to institutions, help-seeking can lead to a number of negative outcomes, such as loss of social support, financial stability, and even physical safety if the violent partner takes action (Lucea et al, 2013; Thomas, Goodman, & Putnins, 2015). In examining support for women of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, it is essential to understand what community resources may exist, and whether they are actually beneficial in regards to safety seeking behavior.

Traditional methods of promoting help-seeking among survivors may unintentionally reinforce inequality or fail to address unique experiences of marginalized women, and research that does not necessarily include an ecological perspective throughout analysis may fail to capture the experiences of black Caribbean women, a group that has specifically been neglected by mental health research (Edge & MacKian, 2009). When considering structural factors, documentation, education, and finances are often considered to be most salient for Latina and Caribbean women, perhaps more than cultural values, but knowing this does not necessarily lead to interventions to promote help-seeking (Reina & Lohman, 2015; Sabina, Cuevas, & Lannen, 2014). Any consideration of violence and help-seeking, then, should consider the larger structural issues and community systems that create and maintain violence, or discourage it.

### **Rationale**

Given the multiple levels of risk of violence for women of Haitian descent living in the DR, it is important to consider how their experiences fit into the larger body of literature surrounding violence and help-seeking. Much of the literature has focused on American and European contexts, so general attention should be paid to expanding the body of theory on gendered violence and survivors' help-seeking in order to understand whether these frameworks

are useful in other contexts. Some links have also been established between early life trauma and adolescent motherhood, but risk of violence as an adolescent mother has not been examined to the same degree (Weaver, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2008). Considering the unique experiences of women of Haitian descent in regards to violence and help-seeking may have implications for advocates working with populations of women of Haitian descent, in the DR or possibly in other contexts. In order to assess these women's experiences with violence and help-seeking, we must first examine the degree to which they are at risk for interpersonal and community violence as well as their self-defined needs for which they would seek help. While some may place greater emphasis on violence exposure, women of Haitian descent in the DR may view other needs as higher priority, and this prioritization should be based on their own experiences. Furthermore, it is essential for advocates to understand survivors' ability or willingness to seek or accept help, and through what resources they would primarily do so.

### **Statement of Research Questions**

The present study seeks to address the following research questions:

Research Question I: What types of intimate partner and family violence, physical or otherwise, do women in the *bateyes* report experiencing? What other experiences are endorsed by these women?

Research Question II: What needs do women prioritize as most critical for daily survival in the context of intimate partner or family violence?

Research Question III: How do women seek help through informal support networks to address these self-defined needs? How else do they navigate fulfilling their needs?

### **Methodology**



This study analyzes life history interview interviews conducted by Dr. Ida Salusky in two *bateyes* between 2012-2013. The data is part of a larger ethnographic study examining rites of passage and womanhood among three generations of females of Haitian descent. Participants were recruited in a two-part strategy. Series of mother-daughter dyads were recruited, along with women from an older generation, with the original intent being three-part dyad analysis. The first half of participants were recruited based on existing relationships Dr. Salusky had with women in the community, and the other half were recruited through snowball sampling. In order to be eligible, participants needed to speak fluent Spanish and fit into a dyad system. Dr. Salusky also sought out some unique individuals in the community in order to address different experiences.

Structured life history interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded and transcribed, and analyzed using modified grounded theory (Charmaz, 2012). While the focus of the original study was not interpersonal violence, themes of safety and violence frequently arose within the life history narratives of participants.

### **Participants**

The larger study interviewed 49 participants, all women of Haitian descent. The scope of this study focuses on those who have experiences with interpersonal violence, and so participants who had never been married (legally or common law) were excluded from the sample, in order to assess intimate partner violence risk. In order to focus on questions around navigating violence exposure, only participants who endorsed experiencing violence were included in this analysis. The first author read through all transcripts to determine relevant information as well as determine whether there was sufficient data for an exploratory analysis of help-seeking and violence exposure among this population. After some data was excluded, the first author re-

examined the data to ensure that no relevant data was missing based off exclusion criteria of participants. Ultimately 25 participants were included in the final analysis.

Participants who had experienced at least one legal or common law marriage were divided into three groups for comparison, based on age at time of the interview. Women are at higher risk of intimate violence at different stages of life, as stated earlier, and beyond age, cohort experiences based on generation may be qualitatively different (O’Leary, Tintle, & Bromet, 2014; Peters, Shackelford, & Buss, 2002). Thus there was some possibility of differences between these groups. Given that family violence and intimate partner violence are two of the primary areas of interest in this study, participants’ interviews were also split between early childhood (to examine family violence experienced as a child) and adult life (to examine intimate violence and other experiences in adulthood).

**Group 1.** The first group of participants consisted of seven participants aged 17-27, women who were primarily young mothers, and whose mean age was 20.6 years. In this group, each of the women had Dominican documentation, married for the first time at an average age of 16.7, and had an average 1.1 marriages overall, with a mean of 1.6 children. This group of women was also the one with the most formal education, as the average grade achieved was 10th grade, and three of the women finished high school.

**Group 2.** The next group of participants consisted of eleven participants aged 28-46, whose mean age was 36.6 years. In this group, 82% of the women (n=9) had Dominican documentation, they married for the first time at an average age of 16, and had an average 3 marriages overall, with a mean of 4 children. The average grade achieved was 5th grade, and one of the women finished high school.

**Group 3.** The third group of participants consisted of seven participants aged 47-71, those who are most likely to have been grandmothers, and whose mean age was 55.7 years. In this group, 57% (n=4) of the women had Dominican documentation, they married for the first time at an average age of 18.1, and had an average 2.3 marriages overall, with a mean of 5.4 children. This group of women was also the one with the least formal education, as the average grade achieved was 2nd grade, and none of the women finished high school. (See Appendix A).

### **Measures**

**Interview Protocol.** Interview questions differed based on participants' ages and whether they had ever had children. However, the interviews all followed a basic structure. Initially, participants answered a brief set of questions about demographics, such as age, country of origin, and whether the participant had had children or been married.

Then, participants answered questions about *Early Life History*, in particular regarding family and school. This portion of the interview involved understanding household composition, how family economic and legal status impacted access to education, early entry into the workforce, and early initiation into romantic relationships. After this, participants answered questions about *Respect*. This portion of the interview sought to understand experiences of relationships, both from family and partners, and how these relationships were either positive or negative, as well as participants' perspectives on gendered respect in the community. The next section of the interview protocol was *Womanhood*, in which participants discussed how their perceptions of adult female identity were related to motherhood and their roles in society.

Finally, participants answered questions about *Resources*, in order to determine participants' sense of their options in the community, and what they perceived to be lacking for women in the *bateyes*. Issues of intimate violence were spontaneously brought up at different

points during participants' interviews despite lack of specific questions regarding violence. Based on review of the literature as well as the data itself, the first author identified saturation with these 25 participants as having been reached.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were coded and qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method that involves identifying and analyzing patterns existing within qualitative data, and its theoretical flexibility allows it to be applied across multiple frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis attempts to reflect the reality of data and to more deeply assess data context, or what the researcher believes the data means in the world, and because of this, it presents an ideal form of analysis for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A general goal of qualitative data is to sensitively consider participants' own experiences without emphasizing researchers' own presuppositions, but in the case of this specific dataset, utilization of context and background not included in the data may be more appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In considering gendered violence in LA, for example, many women will not refer to experiences of abuse as violence, or may discuss experiences of abuse in a more evasive manner (Wies, 2017). With this in mind, it may be more appropriate to consider participants' reports within a broader context, so that experiences of violence may be considered based on how a participant understands them, as well as how the researcher understands them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the current study, a flexible theoretical thematic analysis was used, wherein codes, or thematic components related to text, were applied as they answered specific research questions (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The coding scheme for this study was only applied to portions of transcripts that discuss relevant information to the current research questions. We

used content from the original study codes including: *violence, gender violence, jealousy, child support father, difficult choices, economic support, family relationship, family support natal, marital discord, respect: male to female youth, romantic history, sacrifice, safety, who doesn't respect you, and mothers respecting daughters.*

In the first phase of coding 5 full transcripts were selected and the first author and a research assistant engaged in open coding. Text was analyzed and the research team developed ideas surrounding possible broad themes. After, the research team applied these codes to 5 new transcripts to assess the codebook's fit to an independent set of data and to determine whether codes needed to be added, condensed, or modified. Based on the variation between early life experiences and experiences in later adulthood, the research team determined that we would open code new full sets of transcripts split into early life events and events in adulthood to develop a codebook more reflective of discrete experiences during these two phases of life. During the process of open coding, sets of codes were generated by sorting text into categories and meaningful relationships (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Each codebook specified what the data shows specifically surrounding research questions, addressing common narratives, disconfirming narratives, and overall relationships between the data and our research questions (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). In the next stage, after the initial codes were generated, the relevant data was gathered, reread, and re-coded by two researchers after a Cohen's Kappa of 0.82 had been established, with continued spot-checking and discussion to reach consensus about coding in cases of discrepancy (McHugh, 2012). For final codebook, see Appendix B. To work against researcher bias, coders also sought out disconfirming evidence, or data in which participants present narratives that provide evidence against other patterns (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Researchers began the next stage of developing themes by grouping codes with a

connected narrative to our research questions. In reviewing themes, researchers mapped out and defined the themes more carefully, forming a more comprehensive narrative of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Based on trends previously analyzed, we expected themes of family and intimate partner physical violence to emerge, with male family members and partners being the primary, although not necessarily only, perpetrators. Other expected themes of interest were related to barriers to help-seeking and risk factors for violence, either in the family or in relationships. Due to a constructivist framework, this proposal did not intend to discover a sense of absolute truth, but rather to shed light on the multiple truths of experience that our sample of women report and interpret these reports based on contextual history and theoretical frameworks (Adams, 2007). Given that the dataset used has already been collected, it was essential that throughout analysis, the researcher continue to learn and adapt to be more sensitive to the experiences of these women, with whom I have not personally worked, but whose data I am privileged to consider and analyze in order to share their narratives surrounding violence in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

## **Results**

Pseudonyms are used to ensure participant anonymity. Results were expected to vary between generational groups; however in many cases there was not significant variance between groups in terms of experiences. As such, results are presented in aggregate. When significant variation did occur, it is noted.

### **Experiences with ethnic discrimination**

Throughout interviews, participants discussed or alluded to larger cultural or institutional structures that impacted their lives and the lives of others. Some women (4/25) brought up issues

of prejudice that they had experienced, such as anti-Haitian speech from others, profiling from law enforcement, and feeling pressured to conceal or denounce Haitian identity. Marilyn, age 31 at interview, reported that some people she knew pretended not to speak Creole in order to hide their Haitian ancestry, but that she did not want to fall into this strategy of “*negando mi nacionalidad*/denying my nationality.” Other negative experiences of participants may have also been due to anti-Haitian bias on the part of other individuals or systems, but these were the experiences explicitly discussed by participants. Participants were not asked about experiences of ethnic discrimination directly, and the spontaneous discussion of these issues demonstrates how salient these experiences were to development of womanhood and adulthood for some participants.

### **Childhood experiences**

**Loss in childhood.** In terms of life before participants’ first common law marriage (effectively childhood), many participants identified loss, poverty, difficulty with school, general unhappiness with childhood, and violence in childhood as difficult or challenging experiences. Loss during childhood was primarily characterized by losing a caregiver, either due to death (5/25) or by a parent abandoning the family and not returning (2/25). Maria, age 42 at interview, reported that her father’s death as a child led to her losing motivation and resources to achieve her dream of becoming a doctor:

*Porque mi deseo era siempre ser, para ser doctora. Entonces me desanime porque mi papa murió y no tenía, mi mama no podía sacar adelante. [...] había que comprar muchas cosas para universidad que era cara pero mi mama no tenía la manera de [salir adelante].*

Because my dream was always to be a doctor. But I became discouraged because my father died and...my mother couldn’t get ahead. We had to buy many things for university that were expensive and my mother didn’t have a way to [do this].

Loss of caregivers may have affected participants' life trajectories in multiple ways, with varying emotional outcomes and physical resources at women's disposal. Early disruptions in family structures and caregiving may have had significant impacts on women's relationship functioning, support systems, and resources, especially in terms of financial resources parents could contribute. These changes also may have affected how participants overall discussed and interpreted their childhoods, as participants focused their discussion on their childhood families on their mothers. Nine out of 25 participants (five of whom were in the middle age cohort) reported that they were mainly raised by female parental figures such as mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Comparatively, only six out of 25 explicitly reported that a father or other paternal figure was closely involved in their upbringing. The ways in which the makeup of participants' families affected their experience varied, but in later discussions of supportive networks in adulthood, participants focused on female family members' presence and help in navigating their self-defined needs.

**Childhood work and poverty.** Several participants endorsed a dearth of financial resources in childhood, particularly related to their families' needs not being met. Fourteen out of 25 participants endorsed working outside of the home to contribute to family income, eight of whom reported their parents specifically request they work. Two of these participants reported experiencing abusive or exploitative work that they felt they could not leave. Some participants did not report the age at which they started working, but those who did had a range of beginning work outside of the home as early as eight years old to 17 years old, while the average age at first work outside the home was around 13 years old. Mariana, age 22 at interview, discussed the joint task of taking care of family matters at home by washing clothes and making food while also working outside of the house.



*Cuidar a los niños, yo salía de la escuela [...] yo me quedaba haciendo comida, lavando su ropa [...] Desde muy joven, desde los... vamos a ver a los 8 o 9 años que ya yo estaba grandecita y eso, yo me hacía cargo de los más chiquitos, y yo después como a los 12 años me fui a trabajar para allá para ella nueve de la Charly, ahí empecé a trabajar.*

To take care of the children, I left school [...] I stayed at home and prepared the food, washed clothes [...] Since I was very young, from...let's say 8 or 9 years since I was a little grown, I took care of the younger ones, and later when I was 12 I went to work at [name of sector outside *batey*], and there I began to work.

A few participants (2/25) reported that issues with finances affected their ability to go to school, and that they were not enrolled in order to contribute to the household by working in or outside of the home. Esperanza, age 56, discussed her mother refusing to enroll her in school as she was “*la única hembra en la casa, y ella [la madre] decía "quien me va a fregar, quien me va a limpiar la casa?"*”/ “the only girl in the house, and she [her mother] said, “who is going to wash, who is going to help me clean the house?”” Participants being expected to work in or outside of their homes due to family need may have meant that they were unable to pursue different goals or interests, and make meaning of these differing opportunities. This early process of negotiating limited options mirrors several participants’ experiences in adulthood, wherein they had to balance their own values and wishes with major limitations and barriers to their goals.

**Interpersonal violence and conflict in childhood.** Along with these specific challenges that limited participants’ options, some participants (5/25) endorsed a general sense of unhappiness with childhood, often alluding to the belief that marriage was an opportunity to escape the childhood in which they lived.

*Ana, age 27: En realidad yo no pensaba cuando yo iba a ser una mujer adulta, porque yo siempre tenía un peso, yo siento que nunca viví una niñez feliz porque siempre estaba trabajando, forzada y eso, yo decía "Dios mío... soy una niña y vivo una vida forzada, parezco una persona adulta ya, yo no vivo una vida igual que todos los demás niños, yo vivo como una persona adulta" Y nada, después yo pensaba que cuando yo me casara entonces yo iba a estar tranquila y a vivir feliz.*

Ana, age 27: In reality I never thought about when I would be an adult woman because I always had a burden. I felt that I never lived a happy childhood because I was always working hard and such. I said, “My god...I am a child and I live a hard life. I seem like an adult person already, I don’t live a life like all the other children, I live like an adult.” After, I thought that when I married I would live a happy life and be at peace.

Several participants who endorsed feeling their childhood was unhappy also endorsed experiencing what they viewed as mistreatment from caregivers (3/5) and working from an early age (3/5). It is important to note that participants had different interpretations and ideas about what constituted mistreatment from caregivers. For example, Flor, age 18 at interview, reported having a happy childhood without mistreatment, as she interpreted physical forms of punishment as culturally normative, as “*eso es normal aquí, que las madres falte el respeto a sus hijos*”/ “that’s normal here, that mothers don’t respect their children”.

Ultimately, six out of 25 participants specifically endorsed feeling mistreated by caregivers. Participants did not always specify what constituted mistreatment, but expressed the belief that they had been “*maltratado/mistreated*,” when participants such as Denny, age 24, provided details, they specifically discussed physical aggression from caregivers, who “*me daba golpe, me daba cucharazo, me daba trompones*”/ “hit me with their hands and spoons, punched me.” At times mistreatment from caregivers led to participants needing to enter into adulthood much sooner than planned, or give up certain goals in order to leave one’s home. This can be seen in the case of Lola, age 37 at interview, who reported general mistreatment from her caregivers eventually pushing her into marrying much sooner than she had wished and to a man with whom she initially did not want a relationship:

*Bueno, por un lado porque ya estábamos vivos, me siento orgullosa que estábamos vivos, pero mí mamá no fue que me crió, fue una tía mía, la vida mía no era fácil, yo no me quería casar, pero me trataban muy mal, todo era yo... [...] El marido fue enamorado mío [...] yo no quería tener amores con él porque él era de la calle y no quería casarme quería seguir estudiando...*

Well, on the one hand we were alive, I feel proud that we were alive, but I wasn't raised by my mom. It was my aunt [who raised me]. My life wasn't easy, I didn't want to marry, but they treated me very badly[...] He [the man she eventually married] was in love with me [...] I didn't want to have a relationship with him because he was from the streets and I didn't want to get married I wanted to continue to study....

For Lola, the poor treatment from her caregivers along with threats from her eventual husband to spread negative rumors about her led to her marrying earlier rather than continuing her education. The range of different forms of mistreatment may have affected participants' future relationship development, parenting beliefs and practices, mental health, and sense of options in life.

Some participants did not report mistreatment, but experienced different forms of conflict with family members that fit in the gray areas between single instances of discipline and a relationship with cyclical mistreatment. These four participants endorsed feeling afraid of their parents at one point or another or having a disagreement that significantly affected their lives in some way. For example, Ana, age 27, discussed a conflict with her mother regarding her dating life erupted into violence that injured her enough she could not attend work the next day. However, Ana did not characterize her relationship with her mother as abusive, just that her childhood was an unhappy one.

Ana: *Sí, ella agarro me dio mi golpiza, al otro dia de lo mal que yo estaba no pude ir al trabajo.*

Interviewer: *¿Por tanto golpe? Ay Dios. ¿Esa fue la primera vez que eso paso o ella la había golpeado así antes?*

Ana: *Ella me había dado antes, pero ese dia me dio mas, entonces yo agarre y el martes fui para mi trabajo, le explique que no había podido ir.*

Ana: Yes, she grabbed me and hit me one day bad enough that I couldn't go to work.

Interviewer: Because of the beating? Oh my god. Was this the first time that this happened or had she hit you like this before?

Ana: She had hit me before, but this day it was more, and so I got ahold of myself and Tuesday I left for work, I explained that I hadn't been able to come in.

Despite these conflicts and negative experiences endorsed, some participants (9/25) also reported feeling cared for and respected by caregivers and other family, and two reported feeling strong pride for their families, particularly their mothers. A third of these participants also reported experiencing violence in adulthood, which demonstrates that caregiver and child relationships were complex and love could exist even in the face of mistreatment for some women. For Rosa, age 54, the way that respect was negotiated in her family of origin helped her to determine how to interact with others as an adult to avoid conflict.

*Yo nunca tuve problemas con la gente, siempre respete a la gente mayor y mi mama no me apoyaba lo que estaba haciendo, tú ves [...] Así es que mi mama me criaba, por eso yo estoy criada así de no faltarle el respeto a la gente.*

I never had problems with people, I always respected my elders and my mother didn't support everything I was doing, as you see [...] This was the way my mother raised me, so I was raised to not disrespect others.

The complex relationships participants endorsed with their family members, particularly mothers, raises questions surrounding relationship roles especially for daughters within this context. The challenging and complex experiences participants endorsed as children were both structural and interpersonal in nature, and some of these structures and interpersonal relationships continued to affect participants' lives into adulthood. Participants' options were significantly limited by financial barriers and familial need, and some even felt the need to move toward adulthood more quickly in order to escape unhappy childhoods. Women had to develop different coping strategies to manage the impact that multiple difficult life experiences had on their emotional and social developments. Additionally, these challenges in childhood created vulnerabilities for women in their adult lives as well; lack of financial resources in childhood for example resulted in fewer available resources in adulthood, but there were additional issues of vulnerability to violence in adulthood and limited options navigating interpersonal violence due

to fractured social networks, challenging family relationships, and structural violence limiting access to formal resources. The ways in which women were able to make meaning of their experiences may have affected their coping and vulnerability in adulthood.

### **Adult Experiences**

**Finances.** After participants entered into their first common law marriage and effectively became adults in the eyes of their community, similar challenges continued from childhood. Nine participants out of 25 discussed how serious financial problems and emergencies affected their daily lives, and two discussed working full time for very little pay from exploitative employers and being unable to leave these jobs due to family need. This financial need is not surprising given the communities in which these participants live; the rates of poverty in *bateyes* are significantly higher than the national average in the DR and few employment opportunities exist as sources of income (Suiter, 2017). Participants who discussed this poverty specifically addressed the emotional challenges associated with trying to make ends meet. Mariana, age 22, discussed her motivation for staying in a difficult job instead of trying to seek more desirable opportunities, as she felt a significant obligation to help her family any way possible:

*Mire yo necesito hacerle la casita a mi mama, porque mire ella está pasando, porque con todos esos muchachos que ella tenía, los más chiquitos, viviendo así que no le cabía nada dentro de la casa, y los muchachos estaban durmiendo toditos en una sola cama.*

Look, I need to help my mother at home, because look at what she's going through, with all of the children that she has, the youngest ones, living that way where they can't all fit in the house, and all of those children are sleeping in one bed.

Many of these participants discussed struggling to provide for the most basic necessities for their children, inability to work due to health or other issues, and difficulties balancing multiple responsibilities.

*Cristina, age 37: Sí, [mi esposo] quería tener un hijo mío porque él no tenía, pero al ver que él había conseguido lo que quería, nada le importo de los míos, entonces yo tenía*

*que trabajar en el mercado, andar bajo el solazo en el bateyn, con una ponchera en la cabeza, vendiendo cositas, palomitas, dulces, manís, para poder mantener a los hijos míos en la casa.*

Cristina, age 37: Yes, [my husband] wanted to have a child with me because he didn't have any, but when he saw that he got what he wanted, he had no concern for my children, and so I had to work in the market, walk under the scorching hot sun beating down on me, with a bowl on my head, selling little things, popcorn, sweets, in order to take care of my children in the home.

For some women, financial responsibility and independence represented a markers of adulthood, as they were “*what one has to go through to become an adult/lo que uno tiene que pasar por llegar hacer alguien adulto,*” as Maria, age 42, expressed. Despite viewing these financial responsibilities as part of maturing into adulthood, participants' actual resources and options often limited their ability to be self-sufficient or in control of their lives. Adulthood thus may have brought more responsibilities for participants without also offering a greater number of options.

**Beginning romantic relationships.** All 25 of the participants discussed the process of courtship with their eventual partners. There were multiple reasons participants gave for why they entered into marriages with different men. Two out of 25 participants reported marrying due to a pregnancy, as Roselyn, age 18, explained “*porque para mí el padre se iba a hacer responsable/because to me the father should take responsibility,*” while five women mentioned entering marriage after being coerced to do so either by their partner or by their families. Candida, age 35, discussed a man spending nine days with her without her being permitted to leave in order to convince her to marry him. After this experience, she reported that she did marry him and stayed with him for over three years.

*Lo que pasa es que el parece que estaba enamorado de mí [...] que él me quería decir algo y yo no fui [...] y cuando fui el me agarro así y me arrastro adentro de su casa y de ahí no me dejaba salir. [...] Él me guardo en la casa de un amigo por 9 días, y a los 9 días el me llevo donde mi tía.*

What happened is that it seems like he was in love with me [...] he wanted to tell me something and I wouldn't go to him [...] and when I did go he grabbed me like this and he dragged me into his house and he wouldn't let me leave from there [...] He kept me in the house of a friend for nine days, and after nine days he took me to my aunt's.

Overall, four out of 25 participants reported experiencing a sexual assault that led to marriages as a way to make peace with the experience, especially if perpetrators were participants' partners or men for whom they had feelings.

*Cristina, age 37: Bueno, estábamos en la escuela juntos, pero a mí me interesaban otros muchachos que no eran él, pero él estaba interesado de mí y yo no, y cuando él se dio cuenta que no estaba por él, el me violó. [...] Y por esa violación mi familia lo hizo responsable, no me aceptaron más en su casa y por esa razón yo tuve que casarme temprano.*

Cristina, age 37: Well, we were in school together, but I was interested in other boys not him, but he was interested in me, and when he realized my feelings weren't for him, he raped me. [...] And my family held me responsible. They didn't accept me in the house and because of this I had to get married early.

In contrast, seven out of 25 participants reported marrying because they fell in love. Even in these cases, some potential power differentials existed within these relationships. For example, seven out of 25 participants (six from the youngest cohort) reported marriage before the age of 18 with an age gap of at least five years between themselves and their partners, though none of them reported being coerced into marriage.

The various patterns across participants regarding the beginnings of their romantic relationships may have some implications for how different relationship dynamics developed within their marriages. Relationships starting due to coercion or differences in power may have meant these were characterized by further coercion over time; it would likely be difficult for women to establish balance in a relationship initiated in an imbalance of power. This might have

increased risk of violence or conflict within relationships and limited women's options in handling these issues.

**Life during and after marriage.** Once participants entered into marriage, 10 out of 25 reported experiencing conflict with their partners or having generally unhappy marriages, and 14 participants out of 25 reported experiencing violence or mistreatment in marriage. Some (8/25) participants reported having partners who engaged in substance use, such as drinking or drug use, that negatively affected their family. These eight participants discussed their partner's substance use as a form of disrespect, impetus for violence, or an activity that limited the amount of financial resources in the household.

Elisa, age 34: *No, mi esposo no me muestra mucho respeto. Ah. Ahí si no hay mucho respeto [...] Viene de la calle, viene tomado y viene a desquitarse conmigo su bebida. Como que yo tengo la culpa de algo que paso en la calle.*

Elisa, age 34: No, my husband doesn't show me much respect. Ah. There is not much respect there. [...] He comes from the streets, he comes home drunk, and comes to take out his drunkenness on me. As though it's my fault if something happens out there.

Only two participants reported engaging in substance use themselves, mainly alcohol for the purpose of coping with emotional stress, as Alejandra, age 38, discussed “*olvidarme de los problemas, le compraba ropa a mi hijo [...] había un problema con un hombre/* to forget my problems, [having to] buy clothes for my children [...] if there's a problem with a man.”

Differences in gendered reporting of substance use may reflect community norms and values; while men who engaged in alcohol or drug use were seen as abandoning or disrespecting their families, the two women who reported alcohol use endorsed doing so in order to cope with the stress of maintaining families. Overall, a fifth of participants, one of whom endorsed engaging in substance use herself, reported that substance use would be an appropriate reason to end a



relationship. Mariana, age 22, argued that to be in a relationship with another person, one would have to stop engaging in substance use and other behaviors that could negatively affect others:

*Eso es parte del respeto, porque si yo le digo algo a usted como mi pareja que es, aunque sea por respeto, si usted está haciendo algo mal, aunque usted quiera hacerlo, pero por respeto usted debería dejar de hacerlo. Si yo le digo "mira q eso que usted está haciendo está mal, no hagas eso..."*

This is part of respect, because if I say something to you as my partner, even if it's with respect, if you are doing something bad, even if you wanted to do it, but for respect you should stop doing it. If I say "look, that thing you are doing is bad, don't do that...."

Of the 14 participants who reported experiencing violence in adult relationships, five also endorsed experiencing mistreatment as children. In the context of this data, interpersonal violence was operationalized as acts of physical and sexual aggression and unwanted physical and sexual contact. These acts may have been actually carried out or simply threatened. For two of these participants, this violence was carried out by family members, while all 14 reported physical, sexual, or threatened violence from a romantic partner. Some participants (6/14) reported that they had experienced physical discipline from family members in the past, but Luz, age 54, specifically reported that no one before her spouses had hit her.

Luz: *Las cosas antes y las cosas ahora no son lo mismo, no, mira yo crecía, yo tengo 54 años, [...] en la mano de mi mama, mi abuela, mi abuelo, mi papa, ninguno me dio golpes. [...]*

Interviewer: *¿Pero el marido sí? [...] ¿Y el primer marido o todos?*

Luz: *Toditos...*

Luz: Things before and things now aren't the same at all, look at how I was raised, I'm 54 years old [...] from the hands of my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, my father, no one hit me. [...]

Interviewer: But your husband did. [...] And just your first husband or all of them?

Luz: All of them...

Thus, while there may have been a connection between childhood and adult experiences for some participants, it is important to note that adulthood victimization occurred even for some

participants who had not experienced any violence, mistreatment, or physical discipline as children.

The 14 participants who endorsed experiencing violence from spouses endorsed regular and recurrent violence that was often difficult to predict. Marilyn, age 31, reported that her husband only became violent after they had been together for some time.

Interviewer: *¿Y el le trataba muy mal, cuanto tiempo usted duraba casada?*

Marilyn: *Como un año y medio viviendo con él.*

Interviewer: *¿Y cuando comenzó a...?*

Marilyn: *Uy, desde el principio, porque el es como, un día estaba muy bien, el otro día amanecía como aburrido, peleando y que nadie podía hablar con el, ni los amigos siquiera.*

Interviewer: And how long were you married before he began to mistreat you?

Marilyn: I had lived with him about a year and a half.

Interviewer: And when did he start to...?

Marilyn: From the beginning, because he was the type where one day he would be very happy, and then the next day he would wake up bored and fight, and no one could talk to him, not even his friends.

This marital violence was thus unpredictable as well as severe, with Marilyn also reporting that “*Yo tengo miedo que me mate / I was afraid that he would kill me.*” Marital violence at times thus seemed unescapable, but women still developed strategies to extricate themselves from these relationships.

Interpersonal conflict was also endorsed by several participants, which was operationalized in this study as disagreements or relationship problems between individuals that did not necessarily escalate to physical violence; eight out of 25 participants reported infidelity from romantic partners, all of whom also reported experiencing violence at the hands of their partners. Some of these cases of infidelity began after marriage, but other participants discovered that their partner had been married or in another relationship before their relationship began. Only Esperanza, age 56, denied ever experiencing infidelity within her marriage.

Alejandra, age 38: *El primer día él tenía una ex novia aquí y la ex novia para hacerme daño fue para allá y le dijo que ella lo iba a esperar en un sitio, y yo me di cuenta, yo lo agarre y le dije "no vas para ninguna parte" Él pensó que yo estaba relajando, y después él quiso ponerse violento, lo agarre y le di y el mismo se asombró "wow", bueno eso fue algo que lo marco para el resto de sus días.*

Alejandra, age 38: The first day he had an ex-girlfriend here and this ex-girlfriend to hurt me went there and told him that she would wait for him somewhere and I found out, I grabbed him and said "you are not going anywhere," He thought that I was mocking him and later he became violent, I grabbed him and hit him and it surprised him, and that was something that marked him for the rest of his days.

Participants whose partners had extramarital affairs or who were in relationships at the time of their courtship reported this causing a great deal of conflict. As illustrated in the quote above, this conflict was sometimes between oneself and one's spouse, but also occurred between women engaged with the same man. Regardless of whether there was actual physical conflict, participants viewed infidelity as a serious problem in a relationship. In fact, nine out of 25 participants reported that monogamy should be an expectation in a relationship, and that infidelity was an appropriate reason to end a relationship. Participants reported that infidelity was related to other relationship problems and that it often ruined homes:

Esmeralda, age 47: *...pero después que usted tiene a su marido y el empieza a enamorarse y la otra la ve en a calle ya empiezan las habladurías y usted no va a estar igual [...] entonces todo eso uno dice "pero fulano se está riendo de mí, porque?" y si uno es inteligente uno ve y dice "algo está pasando" Y luego el vecino dice "fulano está enamorando a fulana y vive con fulanita" ahí vienen los problemitas y ya uno no quiere cocinarle, lavarle ni nada, uno dice "porque me está haciendo eso con esa persona que vive ahí y me está mortificando" y hay veces que esa persona te mortifica la vida, comienzan los problemas en el hogar.*

Esmeralda, age 47: ...but after you have a partner and he begins to fall in love and have mistresses and others see him in the street the gossip begins and you won't be the same [...] and so everything is to say "but you're laughing at me, why?" and if I'm intelligent I see this and say "something is happening." And later a neighbor says "your man is in love with another woman and lives with her," and here come the problems, and then one doesn't want to cook, clean or anything, I say, "why is he doing this to me with this person who is living there and humiliating me," and there are times that this person humiliates your life, which causes problems at home.

Infidelity was thus mainly discussed as a problem due to its related consequences such as gossip in the community and damage to one's reputation, as well as the financial damage to one's household if partners were supporting multiple women. These associated consequences may be particularly important considering the cultural context surrounding gender norms in marriage and the expectations of men to provide for their families (Bueno & Henderson, 2017a; Howard, 2001; Wies, 2017).

**Social Support and Strength in Relationships.** It is possible to interpret these women's experiences primarily in terms of risk factors and adverse experiences, but this interpretation may leave out possibilities of strength and community that some women reported in the face of limiting structural factors. While participants identified many issues in their adult lives, there were also different social support networks identified as sources of strength (see Table 1). When considering these supportive relationships, Cristina, age 31, identified unity and mutual support in the face of poverty:

*Sí, somos pobres pero vivimos felices. El problema de uno es para todos, aunque no tenemos, por ejemplo un dolor de cabeza o algo paso, estamos todos juntos. Nunca llegue a discutir con mi familia, respetamos a toditos, la mayoría somos comadres, compadres y ahijados, así que tratamos.*

Yes, we were poor, but we live happily. One person's problems are everyone's, even if we don't have it, like a headache or something happened, we are all together. I never went to fight with my family, we respect everyone, most of us are dear friends and godchildren, so we treat each other as such.

Table 1. Sources of support among participants

Sources of Support	Participants who endorsed this as a supportive environment	Participants who endorsed this as an unsupportive environment
Larger community	7	4
Church community	6	1

Families	12	3
Spouses	1	10

### Negotiating Needs

**Relationship Values.** A major theme that arose from this analysis was the process of balancing different needs given the major structural limitations on participants' options. Some of this balance was informed by participants' values, such as the different values participants held around interpersonal relationships. Women varied on what they considered to be appropriate relationship boundaries, in other words, what they considered to be tolerable or intolerable in relationships. Some of these have been discussed already, such as infidelity and substance use, which were overall considered to be appropriate reasons to end a relationship.

However, the most common relationship expectation participants reported was respect and nonviolence from the other person. In fact, 13 participants (n=25) across different age cohorts reported that physical aggression and violence (such as beatings, threats, and attempts at murder or other serious injury) and other forms of disrespect (such as lack of trust or overall perception that the other individual did not value the participant's agency) were reason enough to end or avoid relationships. Of these 13, 10 had reported that they had experienced violence in adulthood, and five had experienced violence in childhood. Even participants in this group who may not have left relationships due to violence reported that they would have been justified in doing so. Denny, age 24, reflected that while she felt that she was a compassionate person, it was not appropriate to expect her to forgive mistreatment or maintain relationships with those who mistreated her.

*Ellos cuando hay a veces cuando van a comprar me dicen malas palabras “no estoy faltando respeto por qué tú me falta respeto” “no yo no estoy faltando respeto para y etcétera” “pues está bien. Yo voy a despachar pero el otro día no vuelva porque no quiero que yo falto respeto a ti para llegar a otra situación más grave.” Y así va un día y*

*no vuelve porque no quiero que maltratar. Yo soy una persona muy amorosa pero si me maltrata...*

They have times when they go to tell me horrible words, “I’m not disrespecting you because you’re disrespecting me,” “no I’m not disrespecting you and etcetera,” “well okay. I’m going to deal with this but I’ll come back to it another day because I don’t want to disrespect you and get to a worse situation.” And a day goes by and I don’t come back to it because I don’t want to mistreat anyone. I’m a very loving person but if you mistreat me...

However, for Denny and two other participants in this group, violence and disrespect as relationship boundaries were not necessarily black and white, as they viewed violence and disrespect as potentially acceptable from certain individuals. Two participants (one who had also discussed violence as a relationship boundary) reported that violence or disrespect from their mothers was undesirable, but not a reason to cut ties, as Ana, age 27 articulated, “*yo soy la hija y ella la madre pues tiene que tenerme cierto respeto/* I was the daughter and she the mother and so I had to have a certain level of respect for her.” Cristina, age 37, reported somewhat the opposite of this tension; she had left a violent home as a child and believed she was entitled to receive nonviolent treatment from family members, but did not adopt this same attitude with her romantic relationships. Though she had left a violent marriage, she dealt with lingering guilt and blamed herself for her ex-partner’s violence toward others.

*No, yo no mate a nadie, pero el problema que hay es que él estaba por mí y yo no, y él se casó con otra mujer y la mujer lo engañó a él con su mejor amigo, y cuando él se dio cuenta de la traición de la mujer con el amigo él lo mato. [...] es mi culpa porque debí de vivir con él, porque él no era tan malo conmigo.*

No, I didn’t kill anyone, but the problem was that he was there for me and I wasn’t, and he married another woman and this woman cheated on him with his best friend, and when he figured out this betrayal with this woman and his friend, he killed him. [...] It’s my fault because I should have lived with him, because he wasn’t so bad when he was with me.

Three participants out of 25 directly mentioned that they would not enter into new relationships due to previous negative experiences. Each of these participants had experienced

violence at the hands of a spouse. Mercedes, age 34, reported that she would not marry in the future and if she could live her life again, she would not marry:

*Hay que luchar mucho. Yo digo. Mira ahora, Dios me manda carajita otra vez, yo no me caso. Verdad! [...] Dios. Si yo voy pa' la escuela, voy pa' la escuela y trabajando. No me caso, en ese tiempo, ahora. [...] Si yo fuera otra niña, no me caso.*

I have to struggle a lot. I say. Looking now, God gave me a kid once again, and I won't get married. That's the truth. [...] God. If I go to school, go to school and work. I won't marry, right now. [...] If I was young again, I wouldn't marry.

This attitude that participants could control exposure to future violence through isolation from romantic relationships may challenge one to consider different responses women have to interpersonal violence and what long-term effects these relationships may have on social and emotional functioning. Some women believed that they had the ability to avoid future exposure, and this may have been a psychological strategy to navigate their own experiences.

**Gender violence and responsibility.** This discussion of one's ability to control violence exposure was paralleled in discussions of gender violence in the larger community. Ten participants reported that they believed men in the community mistreated or perpetrated violence against women and more than half of the participants who reported this (6/10) were between 47 and 71 years old. Women who endorsed this, such as Isabela, age 18, reported that men felt entitled to women, "*porque son hombres, sienten derecho* / because they are men, they feel they have the right." Belkis, age 52 at interview, described how this entitlement led to escalation from street harassment to violence in her community:

*Yo he visto muchos muchachos que les dicen palabras obscenas a las jóvenes o quieren tocarlas y ellas no quieren les dicen palabras feas y si les dicen alguna palabra fea y esa muchacha les contesta mal, algunos hasta golpes les dan [...]*

I have seen many young men who say obscene things to young women or who want to touch them when the women don't want it, they say ugly words and if they say something rude and that young woman answers back, they beat her [...]

In the context of community gender violence, 10/25 participants (eight of whom had discussed community gender violence) endorsed the idea that women had the ability to protect themselves from harm through their interactions with other people, and that they deserved resulting consequences if they failed to take certain measures such as avoiding alcohol, dressing modestly, and avoiding sexual behavior. For these participants, some of the conflicts between men and women in the community were due to or exacerbated by women's behavior. Of these 10 participants, eight had reported awareness of gender violence in the community. These participants thus believed that some of the gender violence that takes place within their communities is in part due to the ways in which women behave, such that at times men "*se sienten libre de decirle cualquier cosa*/feel free to say whatever they want" after young women provoke or react to misogynist behaviors (Elisa, age 34). Other women reported that while young women in the community do not provoke violence they may be allowing it through their dress or alcohol use, as Flor, age 18, discussed "*se están faltando el respeto ellas mismas dejando que un hombre las toque*/they are not respecting themselves and this allows men to touch them."

While this discussion of women's responsibility to protect themselves from violence may be troubling when interpreted from certain angles, this perspective speaks to these women's sense of control and safety in their own lives. Within systems that so limits their options, women's locus of control may vary; believing that one is responsible for effectively protecting themselves may have negative consequences (such as internalized as well as externalized blame), but it may also benefit women to feel a sense of control over their own safety and well-being.

**Self-sufficiency.** Along with these values surrounding setting limits in relationships, some participants also endorsed a desire to be more in control of their own lives. Specifically,



four out of 25 participants reported that they wanted to be entirely financially self-sufficient and not need to rely on any other people, including family members:

*Lola, age 37: Bueno pensaba que me gustaría trabajar, tener lo mío, como pobre, porque somos todos pobres, pero me gusta trabajar, no estar dependiendo de nadie y si usted compra un comedor o hace una casa de block yo no tengo que estar pendiente a eso, tengo que estar pendiente de lo mío, trabajar para tener lo mío, no llenarme de lujos, eso no me gustaría, pero vivir tranquila.*

Lola, age 37: Well I thought that I would like to work, have my own things, as a poor person, because we're all poor, but I like to work, to not be dependent on anyone and if you buy a dining table or have a house I won't have anything outstanding from this, I have to take care of my own things, work to take care of myself, not to fill myself with luxury, I don't like that, but to live calmly.

However, four other participants endorsed appreciating a sense of mutual support between themselves and other members of the community or their families. Comparatively, 14/25 participants reported that they specifically wanted to be independent from men, and to have their own financial resources that were not controlled by a male partner. Largely this perspective was related to the threat of dependence on a violent spouse or one who could not financially provide for one's family. Having one's own resources could thus ensure that women had multiple options to take care of themselves and their families if their spouse was violent or otherwise failing to provide. Of these 14 participants, eight had reported experiencing violence at the hands of a spouse.

*Esmeralda, age 47: ...si el esposo estudia que ya los dos sean profesionales, si uno sale a trabajar, el otro sale a trabajar y mientras el muchacho está chiquito la madre se queda en la casa, y si tiene a su mama o una persona que le pueda ayudar, prepararse, estudiar, he pensado de otra manera porque la vida está difícil...*

Esmeralda, age 47: ...if the husband studies that both can be professionals, if one leaves to work, the other leaves to work and while the children are young the mother stayed in the house, and if you have a mother or another person who can help, prepare things study, I've thought about other ways because life is difficult.

Three participants denied that women should be independent from men, instead endorsing a perspective of traditional but complementary roles within a marriage as most appropriate for emotional success:

Luna, age 71: *No, porque el hombre es de la calle, la mujer es de la casa. La mujer tiene que respetarse y darse su honor [...] porque el hombre son tentaciones del demonio [...] la mujer es la que tiene que respetarse para que la respeten.*

Luna, age 71: No, because men are of the streets, women are of the house. Women have to respect themselves and give themselves their honor [...] because men have temptations from the devil [...] women are the ones who have to respect themselves so that they will be respected [by others].

Somewhat connected to the idea of independence was the desire for further educational attainment, which six out of 25 participants (all from the younger cohorts) endorsed. Educational attainment was discussed in the context of an independent career and self-sufficiency, so it is possible that this connection inspired the drive for furthering one's education. For these participants, having to leave school due to finances and pregnancy was a difficult and emotional decision, and there was a strong desire to return and finish their educations:

Mariana, age 22: *A mí me encantaba ir a la escuela, yo deje de ir después que yo me gradúe de bachiller, quería inscribirme a mi universidad, y entonces no pude...*

Mariana, age 22: I loved going to school, I stopped going after I graduated high school, I wanted to enroll in university, but I couldn't...

Esperanza, age 56: *Claro, porque siempre me gustaba la escuela, ahora mismo yo estoy en la escuela. Me hice una promesa a Dios, antes de que yo me muera yo voy a aprender a leer [...]*

Esperanza, age 56: Of course, because I always loved school, even now I am in school. I made a promise to God, before I die I am going to learn to read [...]

**Prioritization and balance.** Participants discussed many situations wherein they had to balance and prioritize these interpersonal values as well as other needs. 20/25 participants discussed situations wherein their needs conflicted, or where they had to make decisions between

limited options due to lack of choices. Paloma, age 63, reflected that in general, “*hay que perder para ganar*/you have to lose something to gain something,” when considering the responsibility of choosing between different limited options. Some of these decisions for participants involved tangible and financial needs, while others were more emotional in nature. For example, participants reported balancing needs by getting married in order to gain access to documentation (Mirna, age 37), engaging in sex work in order to afford taking care of her children (Alejandra, age 38), avoiding relationships in order to avoid abuse (Belkis, age 52), and leaving one’s church community after lack of support for their marriage (Juliana, age 17). Flor, age 18, reflected on what felt an impossible amount of tasks for one individual to accomplish just in terms of working while taking care of one’s home and family:

*[...] Son muchos sacrificios y a veces tú no tienes tiempo para nada, porque cuando tu sales de trabajar, el día que tú tienes libre, ese día lo tienes que ocupar en el niño, la casa y tu marido, eso lo complica todo, ya que los muchachos de aquí salen del colegio van a buscar trabajo, las muchachas están trabajando, tienen su niño, tienen su marido y tiene su casa [...] pero cuando ambos trabajan el niño lo puedes dejar con la abuela, y cuando tu vengas del trabajo, cansada, tienes que ir a buscarlo y hacerte cargo de él, porque la abuela es la abuela, no la mama, es muy complicado.*

[...] There are many sacrifices and at times you don’t have time for anything, because when you leave for work, the day that you have free, that day you have to busy yourself with your child, the home, and your husband, that complicates everything, and there are young people already leaving high school to look for work, children who are working, having children, getting married and having a home [...] but when both are working they can leave the child with the grandmother, and when you come back from work, tired, you have to look after your child and take care of them, because the grandmother is the grandmother, not the mother, it’s very complicated.

As Flor discusses, there was little satisfaction in prioritizing needs; even if one was able for example to work and have one’s mother assist with childcare, there may have been a lingering sense of failure as a mother not spending enough time fully present with one’s child,

for example. This dissatisfaction due to such limited options may have lingering effects on participants' sense that they had real power to make decisions in their own lives.

Nine participants, seven of whom had endorsed their needs conflicting, specifically addressed the process of navigating difficult situations, particularly violent or unhappy marriages. Participants discussed the process of why they may have stayed in or decided to leave these marriages, and what those consequences were like for them. For example, Cristina, age 37, left a violent marriage and later blamed herself for her ex partner's violence toward others. Other participants such as Marilyn, age 31, discussed staying in marriages out of love despite regular violence from her spouse as she believed "*que era relajando que estaba conmigo*/that he was relaxed when he was with me." Determining whether to stay or leave in a violent marriage was thus an emotionally challenging experience, which many women navigated through supports from others, particularly other women.

While not all participants discussed these needs directly coming into conflict with one another, 23/25 participants discussed a general struggle within life in the context of their responsibility as women and as mothers. Alejandra, age 38, reflected that it was this evolving sense of suffering that helped her feel as though she was an adult woman, as she had to learn how to survive with this suffering:

*Porque la vida me ha golpeado, yo soy una mujer sufrida, sufrida en mi niñez, en mi adolescencia, cuando empecé a ser mujer, sufrida con los hijos, entonces ya yo me siento mujer madura, una mujer adulta, porque ya yo sé cómo sobrevivir, por todo lo que yo he pasado.*

Because life has beaten me, I am a woman who's suffered, suffered in my childhood, in my adolescence; when I began to be a woman, I suffered with my children, and so I feel like a mature woman, an adult woman, because now I know how to survive from everything that I had been through.

The sense of self sufficiency that came with this responsibility and struggle may have been exacerbated by lack of support from spouses and other members of one's social circle; some women when discussing their daily tasks would also mention that they had been put into a position wherein they had to be self-sufficient as others would not contribute.

Luz, age 54: *Hay días que yo fui, después de llegar vi que no había nada, yo fui en diciembre y no había cuartos, ellos no tenían nada, me puse a limpiar algo, lavando algo, limpiando a la gente y yo gano 2000 o 3000 pesos y les compre cosas y se las lleve a ellos, pero ahora son 2, mi mama y mi papa, yo le dije que viniera para acá, pero me dijo "no, yo no me puedo hacer responsable sola por ustedes, teniendo todos esos hijos" Él no quiere ser responsable.*

Luz, age 54: There are days that I went after arriving I saw there wasn't anything, I went in December and there weren't rooms, they had nothing, I began to clean there, wash something, wash people and I made 2000 or 3000 pesos and I bought them things and brought them to them, but now there's two, my mother and my father, I told them that to come here, but he told me, "no, I can't be fully responsible for you, having all of these children." He didn't want to be responsible.

It may be that some of this desire for self-sufficiency was due to participants' lived experiences being denied mutual support from those on whom they expected to depend. This may not have been as much a value as a strategy evolving from lived experiences.

Seven participants, six of whom discussed their own day to day responsibilities, also brought up a sense of larger community struggle among women that was similar to their daily struggle as individuals. Specifically, these participants talked about how women as a social group have to engage in different mechanisms to survive because of the multitude of pressures and risks they faced.

Mercedes, age 34: *Muy duro. Mira en este tiempo, como violan a las muchachas, la matan, la maltratan a las mujeres. Y uno tuviera una carajita, trabajaba, cogía mucha lucha las mujeres, demasiada lucha con los hombres. Y el maltrato, los hombres lo maltratan, así.*

Mercedes, age 34: Very difficult. Look at now, how they assault women, kill them, mistreat women. And if the woman has a kid, working, taking on a lot of struggle, and then a lot of struggle with men. And the mistreatment, men who mistreat them.

Mercedes discussed the many forms of gender violence she saw in the community, and how women have to fight against men to combat mistreatment. Generally participants' perspective on combating gender violence seemed to focus on self-sufficiency, and all but one of these seven participants who discussed women's community struggle also reported wanting to be independent from others or specifically men. These connections lead to some questions about how women may navigate a sense of control in a chaotic environment with limited options such as the *bateyes* of the Dominican Republic.

### **Help-seeking**

One of the major factors involved in women's navigation of their different needs and values was their ability to seek help from different people and institutions. In this analysis, we considered times when women sought out support from others or received support as examples of help-seeking and receiving.

Analysis on help-seeking among participants focused first on determining which people were in their supportive social networks, in other words, from whom they sought and received support. Throughout interviews, over 3/4 of the participants (19/25) endorsed seeking and receiving support from other women, particularly their mothers and other female family members such as sisters and grandmothers. Women served as support for a variety of different needs as listed in Table 2. Much of this support served multiple needs at once, though assistance with pregnancy and caring for children was most commonly endorsed as being the kind of support offered by other women. Esmeralda, age 47, reflected on the ways in which her grandmother assisted in supporting her taking care of her children after being left by her partner:

*Mi abuela me ayudaba, ella se levantaba temprano, horneaba pan, ella me ponía a mí a poner carbón y ayudarla a vender dulce de maní, y de lo que ella cocinaba me daba para los muchachos, por lo general había suficiente para que todos comiéramos.*

My grandmother helped me, she got up early, baked bread, she would put me to put charcoal and help her sell sweets, and from what she cooked she gave me for the children, in general this was enough for all of us to eat.

Her grandmother's support was thus material, as well as helping her to attend to her children by providing food for the family. Other participants reported on multiple forms of support being offered by other women. Maria, age 42, reported how her mother encouraged her after she left her husband for his financial irresponsibility and public rejection of her.

*[...] yo le explique a mi mama por qué fue. Y ella me dijo, le dijo a él “ bueno, tu la llevaste, no te llevaste ni tuerca, ni marca ni, ni coma. Tu no puede vivir con ella devuélvame mi hija como tu la llevaste.” Sin un razuna, sin violencia, sin nada.*

[...] I explained to my mother why I left. And she told me, she told him, “well, you took her, you dealt with it, you don't have to deal with her marks, how she eats. You can't live with her, return my daughter.” Without argument, without violence, without anything.

For Maria, the support of her mother even involved stepping in to tell her ex-partner to leave, and the rest of her family stepped in to support her in securing housing. This overall family support, particularly from her mother, contributed to Maria's ability to leave an unhappy relationship that damaged her reputation. Other participants specifically reported that their mothers provided some form of housing to assist their leaving a violent or aggressive partner. Another potential source of support were women's spouses and other male relatives, which about a fourth of participants endorsed. The financial and material support participants reported receiving from spouses was regarding day to day spending and the fact that they felt they “depende de mi esposo/depend on my husband” (Juliana, age 17) financially. A few participants also reported receiving help from fathers and male family members; this support was always from male family members as well as female family members, and participants did not report male family members providing support without female family members also providing some forms of support. Overall, approximately a third of participants reported that men provided

some form of support to them. This was not on the same scale as support from other women, but is still significant, especially given narratives surrounding women's tendency to seek and receive support primarily from other women.

Table 2: Help-seeking by type and entity

Type of Support	Female family members and friends (19)	Spouses (6)	Male relatives (4)	Formal Support (8)
Financial help and material needs	3	5	2	2
Pregnancy and care of children	8		2	2
Housing	6			
Help with daily tasks	2	1		
Interpersonal conflict and abuse	7			1
Educational resources				3
Medical care				1
Refusal of support	3	6	1	2

Participants reflected on some limitations and complications of informal support.

Mercedes, age 34, reflected on her difficulties managing financial aspects of motherhood without any support from her family:

*Cuando yo tuve la primera niña mía, yo comencé a luchar. Yo no tenía nadie que me ayudara. [...] La niña mía, yo tenía que buscarla pa darle comida. Mi mama no me ayudaba, ni mi papa.*

When I had my first child, I began to strive. I didn't have anyone to help me. [...] My child, I had to look to provide her food. My mother didn't help me, nor my father.

Comparatively, Mercedes reflected on receiving support from her spouse later in life:

*“Ahora tengo mi marido. Mi marido me ayuda mucho, con mis hijos. Y yo no con mucho trote como yo tenía con la primera niña mía. El me ayuda y ese afán pa' los hijos de él./Now I have*



my husband. My husband helps me a lot with my children. And I don't have as much fight like I did with my first child. He helps me and has an effort for his children.”

In examining the issue of failure to support further, six participants (four of whom had reported not receiving support from spouses or other women) discussed conditions that they felt they had to meet in order to receive support from others. For example, Maria, age 42, reflected that the father of her child expected her to engage in sexual relations with him in order to receive financial support for their child:

[...] El quería que yo tenía relaciones con él para [el dinero.] [...] Si. A veces la niña no tenía leche. Mandaba decirle y él me mandaba. O si no él mismo me traía la leche y me daba dinero.

[...] He wanted me to have sex with him for [money.] [...] Yes. At times my daughter didn't have milk. I would send to tell him and he would send to me. Or if not he himself would bring me milk and give me money.

Ana, age 27, reflected that while her mother supported her by housing her after leaving a violent partner, it was only under her mother's conditions regarding her future relationship with her partner and next steps:

*Sí, vine para acá para donde mi mama y después de que yo me vine para acá mi mama discutió con el y ya ellos eran enemigos, yo no te hablo ni tu tampoco, y mi mama me decía que ya no iba a pisar mi casa, que era una falta de respeto, y me quede precisamente en el cuarto que esta al lado de mi casa...*

Yes, I came to where my mother was and after I came here my mother argued with him and they were enemies, I don't talk with [him] and neither does he, my mom would tell me that I couldn't step foot in my house, that it would be a lack of respect, and I stayed exactly in one room that was near my house...

While her mother's boundaries regarding this support may have been due to concern, the conditions were still present, and may have limited the participant's sense of her own options in terms of next steps. These conditions varied, but these experiences demonstrate how women had to navigate the expectations of people within their support network in order to receive support.

Three participants also discussed experiencing rejection from others when seeking support for a variety of needs, from pregnancy and marriage to recovery after sexual assault. These three participants attempted to find support, and were met with blaming or refusal of help. Denny, age 24 at interview, reported that “*en vez de ayudarme lo que ellos me desayudarme/* instead of helping me [my family] rejected me.” The rejection that these participants experienced may be especially significant considering the difficult nature of recognizing the need to seek help along with the actual action. Two participants, for example, discussed specific challenges related to seeking help for marital issues or domestic violence, including how to recognize when help was needed; Marilyn, age 31, reported “*estaba ciega/I was blind*” to her husband’s mistreatment of her, which made it difficult to even recognize the need for help, let alone seek help. Thus, women must not only navigate the psychological process of recognizing the need to seek help, but also risk rejection and be forced to persist within a situation they have deemed too challenging to stay in. Along with these considerations, women had to navigate the possibility of partial or conditional support. Women thus have a multitude of external and interpersonal challenges to navigate in order to address their needs, which may constrict their options and control over their own behaviors.

A surprising finding was that almost a third of participants (8/25) reported that they received help from formal institutions and services, such as churches, educational organizations, and financial assistance programs. Research generally indicates that disenfranchised women are unlikely to seek out formal services, but in this dataset, participants sought out formal services for a variety of needs. Some participants may have sought out these formal resources when they did not have informal support; over a third (3/8) of these participants had reported total lack of support from other parties. Juliana, age 17, discussed social rejection from her church

community after she began a relationship with a married man, but received emotional support from the pastor of her church:

Interviewer: *¿Y la gente que le trataba mal, que le hacían, o que decían?*

Juliana: *Ah! Me dejaban de hablar, decían que yo no tenía que hacer eso, que taba muy mal porque la que era novia de mi esposo era mi prima. Toda la familia de mi esposo me apoyaron. Las hermanas estaban conmigo como quiera y así.*

Interviewer: *Bueno. ¿Y el pastor? ¿Cómo él le trataba? O ¿Que él le decía?*

Juliana: *Nos trataba bien, porque el pastor mayormente, él no puede juzgar pues dice que no es Dios. Él nos apoyó, cuando nos tenía que hablar, nos hablaba. Así, estábamos en dificultades, en necesidad, y él nos daba la mano.*

Interviewer: And did people that treat you badly, what did they do, or say?

Juliana: Ah! They stopped talking to me, they say that I didn't have to do that, that it was really bad because the girlfriend of my husband was my cousin. All of my husband's family supported me. His sisters were with me like I wanted.

Interviewer: And the pastor? How did he treat you, or what did he say?

Juliana: He treated us well, because the pastor generally, he can't judge because he isn't God. He supported us, when we had to talk, we talked. And so we were in difficult times, in need, and he gave us his hand.

Seeking formal support was not without risk. Luz, age 54, contacted police after being assaulted by her husband's mistress, but this interaction led to Luz herself being accused of murder without cause due to her unfamiliarity with the language and her general fear of the police leading her to present overly agreeable and accidentally confess to a crime without knowing:

*Llego la justicia, pero yo no sabía hablar dominicano, toda la gente me dice "es verdad que tú haces eso" y yo contestaba que "si" y es mentira yo no conozco a nadie [...] la policía me metió presa, porque todas las cosas que me preguntaban yo decía que si "tú mataste a esa gente" y yo decía que sí. [...] yo tenía miedo a la policía, todas las vainas preguntaban y yo decía que si, a todo respondía que sí, porque yo no sabía nada. Después yo deje a ese hombre por eso.*

The police came, but I didn't know how to speak [Spanish], everyone asked, "is it true that you did this," and I said "yes" and it was a lie, I didn't know anybody [...] the police arrested me, because all of the things they asked me I said yes, "you killed this person," and I said yes. [...] I was scared of the police, all of these questions and I said yes, to everything I said yes, because I didn't know anything. After that I left that man because of it.

Though Luz was able to leave her relationship, engagement with police was frightening, confusing, and ultimately unhelpful to addressing her needs. Another participant reported similar issues specifically when seeking support from the police related to interpersonal abuse. The lack of formal structural support for these women along with the challenges related to seeking informal support add further complexities related to addressing their different needs. The different issues women had to navigate through formal and informal support demonstrate how challenging this support can be to access, and how limited their options were in terms of addressing their needs, finding safety, and finding self-defined success.

### **Discussion**

While emerging literature has begun to examine informal as well as formal support, much of this research focuses on help-seeking within Western contexts, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom (Brown, et al, 2014; Renzetti & Edelson, 2008). Literature has also examined differences between women's help-seeking behaviors based on issues of race and documentation status within these contexts, and this paper contributes to a larger discussion of how help-seeking is carried out by multiply marginalized and exploited women (Edge & Mackian, 2010; Flicker et al, 2011; Reina, Lohman, & Maldonado, 2013). While understanding the needs of marginalized women in Western contexts is important, it is also necessary to examine help-seeking in contexts within the global south in order to understand how unique forms of structural violence and other external factors can affect help-seeking behaviors. Given the incredibly personal and culturally influenced nature of help-seeking for violence exposure and other needs, help-seeking strategies may not be generalizable across cultural contexts (Reina, Lohman, & Maldonado, 2013; Woodward et al, 2010). The current study also provides some focus on not just from whom women seek support, but which people and institutions actually

provide support. The process of identifying potential sources of support is a crucial piece of help-seeking, but the outcomes of this informal help-seeking is also critical to understanding the utility of these supports.

There were some similarities between the help-seeking of women in the current study and the understanding of help-seeking in the larger literature. The majority of help-seeking within this population was through informal networks of other women, which is consistent with literature demonstrating that women, particularly women of color, are more likely to seek different forms of support through informal sources, and particularly other women (Estrada Pineda et al, 2012; Evans & Feder, 2014; Flicker et al, 2011; Jansen & Millan, 1991; Morrison et al, 2006; Sosulski & Woodward, 2013; White et al, 2006). Within systems of structural violence, mutual support and solidarity between oppressed peoples has been identified as a unique form of social support and empowerment that can lead to positive change within communities (Levine, 1988). Some women in this study also identified a sense of community struggle among women, whether that focused on the tasks of motherhood or the struggle to survive in the face of gender violence. It is unclear whether this consciousness of larger community struggle is protective, but in the context of this group of women, it existed alongside supportive networks of other women who engaged in mutual help regarding childcare, housing, and extricating oneself from conflict or abuse. Within this study, women did not identify spouses or male relatives as supportive as other women, but this may have been due to the selection of women who had reported experiencing violence in adulthood or childhood. Given the significant number of women who reported specifically intimate partner violence, it may not be surprising that these women's partners were not supportive in other ways.

Overall literature on help-seeking focuses on specific needs rather than examining the variety of complex needs that women have to balance and prioritize for seeking support (Davanzo et al, 2012; Edge & Mackian, 2010; Evans & Feder, 2015; Woodward et al, 2010). While some literature defines help-seeking primarily as using formal resources such as medical and legal services, or engaging with police and other professionals, this study used a broader definition of help-seeking that allows for communication strategies to informal and formal networks regarding self-defined needs. This model can help limit outside biases about what needs are most crucial, and instead give primary agency to the women discussing their experiences.

Rather than only focusing on how women in the *bateyes* negotiate violent marriages, or recover from sexual assault, this analysis addresses multiple priorities, including material priorities of childcare, housing, and financial support. Some literature assumes specific forms of help-seeking are most crucial or necessary for survival, such as reporting violent perpetrators to police, but these actions may not be beneficial or safe for some women. Distrust of formal resources is often due to negative historical experiences as well as risk of repercussions from institutions (Lucea et al, 2013; Petrozziello & Wooding, 2013). For example, one of the women in this study, Luz, did attempt to report a domestic conflict to the police, and the situation escalated to where she herself was falsely accused of a crime. The expectation that police and other formal institutions are sources of support and help is not shared by all individuals, and particularly police encounters serve as traumatic experiences for ethnic and racial minorities (Bryant-Davis, Adams, Alejandre, & Gray, 2017; Fleury et al, 1998). This study also complicates past research regarding informal support being primarily emotional, given that women were able to access financial resources as well as housing through social networks

(Randell et al, 2012). Rather than only seeking out family members, friends, and other members of the community to receive emotional encouragement, validation, or advice, several women endorsed other tangible forms of support provided by members of their social networks. This may mean that formal support, which is often not accessible to marginalized women, may not always be necessary to address material needs.

Though it was unexpected, some women did engage in formal help-seeking, including for domestic conflict. Some of this formal help-seeking might have been influenced by lack of informal support, as some evidence suggests people will turn to formal support as a last resort (Liang et al, 2005; Spencer, Shahrouri, Halasa, Khalaf, & Clark, 2014). However, some of the women in this study did not necessarily endorse that they exhausted other options before engaging in formal help-seeking, and so further exploration is warranted on the conditions under which women may seek out formal support even in the face of significant structural violence. Some of this may have been due to participants' sense of what family members and other sources of informal support could actually provide. Thus the types of needs that women wanted to address may have affected the kinds of individuals and institutions from which they sought this support.

This analysis explored forms of violence women reported experiencing, their self-defined needs, and how these needs were addressed. Examining early life experiences provided context to understand experiences with violence in adulthood. Many of the women in this study reported experiencing interpersonal and structural violence in both childhood and adulthood, which is generally consistent with past research examining how exposure to interpersonal and structural violence in childhood leaves individuals at a higher risk for re-victimization in adulthood (Namy et al, 2017; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008). Marital violence and violence against children are

often intertwined due to their domestic nature and the structures of power that exist within a home, and so this childhood and adulthood victimization can be understood as different forms of abuses of power within domestic relationships (Iadiacola & Shupe, 1998; Namy et al, 2017). Research and public discussion of violence carried out within the domestic sphere sometimes focuses more on the effects on the overall family, particularly children, with less consideration for the impact of relationship violence on women (Romany, 1994). This can not only diminish the importance of women's experiences outside of motherhood, but also ignore the reality of those experiences of those who experience or witness domestic violence in childhood as well as adulthood (Iadiacola & Shupe, 1998; Romany, 1994; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008). In women's discussion of interpersonal violence in adulthood, they generally did not make direct connections such as identifying patterns in relationships or social learning regarding norms of violence in relationships. Some researchers theorize that childhood victimization discourages later development of healthy adult relationships and norms, which may be one factor increasing risk for revictimization, as violent partners may abuse their vulnerabilities (Desai et al, 2002). Pathways between childhood and adulthood victimization are difficult to track, and women in this study did not necessarily identify whether childhood victimization negatively affected the process of developing relationship skills or norms. However, some women implied they were eager to marry young due to difficulties in childhood, and this sense that marriage could help one escape those difficulties may have left them vulnerable to exploitation from others.

Women in the current study also discussed how issues of financial need and interpersonal and structural violence continued to affect them from childhood to adulthood. While perpetrators of violence may have varied from caregivers to spouses, discussion of these women's experiences contributes to a larger understanding of continued risk for violence exposure over



the lifetime by reaffirming trends of revictimization risk for adults who experienced childhood victimization (Desai et al, 2002; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008). While interpreting women's experiences, this analysis prioritized their own words and understanding rather than the researcher categorizing their experiences of violence or conflict as abuse. This population may be less likely to label experiences of violence as abuse, and instead categorize behaviors as mistreatment due to larger cultural discourse surrounding domestic violence in different forms (Latta & Goodman, 2005; Small et al, 2008). The first author balanced larger Western conceptualization of gender violence with women's discussion of their own experiences in order to prioritize women's interpretations of their lives, in line with feminist and multicultural frameworks in qualitative research (Jansen & Davis, 1998; McDowell & Sherry Fang, 2007). It was particularly important to prioritize women's own interpretations of their experiences in order to understand the different ways in which their understanding of violence and conflict may have affected how they navigated the contradictions of relationships where love or affection and violence coexist. Some of the women in this study entered into relationships after being coerced or sexually assaulted, but did not necessarily speak of their partners in negative ways, even those from whom they eventually separated. Some of the ways women interpreted sexual and physical violence from partners may have been influenced by internalized blame, but women also did not necessarily endorse obligation to stay in these relationships, and many of them still left these relationships and took other measures they deemed necessary for their protection. These women did not have to view a partner as an abuser before they deemed behavior unacceptable, and the relationship boundaries they held could thus be enforced without requiring they categorize their relationship as abusive.

Women in this study engaged in a variety of strategies, including developing different loci of control to determine the degree to which they could avoid victimization. Some feminist interpretations of working class women in Latin American and Caribbean countries present these women as having little to no agency or as active participants in their own oppression due to cultural values placed on family as well as perceived lack of education (Collins, 2000; Grzanka, 2014; Koppers, 1994; Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). This interpretation can lead to a paternalistic attitude wherein white women from the global north themselves as experts on the experiences and needs of working class women of color (Grzanka, 2014). These paternalistic attitudes can lead to victim blaming, wherein women who do not engage in the expected strategies, such as seeking out police or leaving a relationship immediately, may be seen as weak or allowing violence to occur and continue (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). In reality, navigating interpersonal and structural violence is complex and the process by which women survive may not always make sense to others (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). In situations of extreme structural violence, women may need to find different ways to make meaning of their experiences and engage in protective measures that focus on what they feel is actually possible given their circumstances (Nash & Hesterberg, 2009). Women in this study identified boundaries and strategies for survival and flourishing in physical, social, and emotional areas, including navigating violence in relationships as well as the way that their husbands' behaviors impacted their reputation in the community. Feminist discourse on how women navigate different forms of violence must allow room for lived experiences that challenge the notion that there is any one correct way to respond to violence, as this might not account for the actual conditions women contend with in their everyday lives.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This exploratory analysis sought to answer questions related to women's exposure to different forms of violence, identified needs women sought to address, and how women engaged in help-seeking to address these needs. This analysis has several limitations; while all data was collected and analyzed in Spanish, the first author is not a heritage Spanish speaker, and some issues with language may have occurred. The team attempted to address this with other analysts who were heritage Spanish speakers, measures to counter bias, and intensive readings on historical, political, and social developments regarding the position of women of Haitian descent in the DR to gain theoretical familiarity with the population. However, it is likely that some cultural nuance was lost within this analysis.

Another limitation is that the protocol and interview used for this analysis did not focus on issues related to violence exposure and help-seeking. Participants spontaneously discussed experiences of this nature, but the data may not fully speak to these experiences given that it was not the focus of the initial study. Women's discussion of different issues may have also been colored by the interview protocol, which focused on pathways to adulthood in the context of the *bateyes*. Thus the current study may be missing some key pieces about different participants' experiences, coping, and help-seeking. For example, the interviewer did not specifically ask about help-seeking or probe as to how women navigated seeking support for their needs as it did not relate to original research questions, and there may have been additional sources of support or tensions related to addressing their self-defined needs.

The limitations of the data mean that some aspects of research questions could not be fully answered or examined. For example, women did not necessarily discuss the process by which they determined that help-seeking was necessary, or that certain changes were required in their lives, particularly in the case of violence from spouses. Women did discuss relationship

boundaries, but it is also unclear whether these boundaries developed as a result of negative relationship experiences; for example, some women discussed leaving partners due to crossing of boundaries, but for others, these boundary issues did not lead to relationships ending. It may be possible that some women established certain relationship expectations after having time to reflect on past experiences.

Further steps are needed to better understand why certain individuals and institutions are selected as potential sources of support, as well as why these entities may be unable to provide support. Women in this study did not always detail reasons they faced rejection particularly from informal sources of support. It may be necessary to assess what keeps people from being able to provide support, including material resources, emotional concerns, and relationship dynamics. It may also be useful to examine the conditions of support that people and entities place on women. Understanding the barriers to receiving support that has been sought out can help inform future efforts to increase access to resources and ensure that women's needs are properly addressed.

## **Conclusion**

Women have a variety of responsibilities, needs, and aspirations that must be balanced with their access to different resources, limitations due to structural violence and inequality, and support or lack thereof from informal social networks. The current study explores how women of Haitian descent in the DR address accessing material needs such as housing and taking care of their children while balancing structural limitations, cultural norms and individual values, and interpersonal challenges. Participants' active participation in their own survival challenges an already flawed paternalistic perspective of white feminism that has historically viewed working class women of color as passive and in need of saving (Collins, 2000; Grzanka, 2014; Kuppers, 1994). The networks of support formed between women in this population demonstrates the

potential of informal support and help-seeking, such that even in the face of chronic structural and interpersonal violence throughout one's life time, there are strong possibilities for growth and community. At the same time, the effects of structural and interpersonal violence should not be discounted, and further activism and efforts must facilitate women's success and thriving under conditions of violence in different forms along with working to dismantle structures of violence and prevent interpersonal violence when possible.

## Appendix A: Participant Demographics

### *Participant demographics*

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	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Number of participants	7	11	7
Age Range	17-27	28-46	47-71
Mean age	20.6	36.6	55.7
Participants with documentation	7	9	4
Average age at first marriage	16.7	16	18.1
Average number of marriages	1.1	3	2.3
Average number of children	1.6	4	5.4
Average grade achieved	10	5	2
Participants with high school diploma	3	1	0

## Appendix B: Definitions of Codes Used

### *Definitions of Codes Used*

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Code	Definition
Relationships before first common-law marriage	Participant makes reference to important relationships and relationship dynamics in the context of their life before marriage. This should only be coding for discussing dynamics and interactions with these individuals, not simply listing people. This should not be coded if it does not capture unique information, but should be used when discussing family or friends' relationship dynamics that participant is aware of but is not directly affected by.
Relationships after first common-law marriage	Participant makes reference to important relationships and relationship dynamics during their adult life. This should only be coding for discussing dynamics and interactions with these individuals, not simply listing people. If a participant discusses dynamics or aspects of relationships in general without referring to a specific relationship with another individual, code as relationships after.
Difficult experiences before first common-law marriage	Participant makes reference to interpersonal, situational, or societal situations that they describe as difficult or that limited their options in some way during early childhood. If the participant discusses witnessing violence or other's difficult experiences as upsetting, apply code.
Difficult experiences after first common-law marriage	Participant makes reference to interpersonal, situational, or societal situations that they describe as difficult or that limited their options in some way during their adult life.
Substance use	Participant discusses alcohol or other drugs, either as used by themselves or others.
Major life change	Participant discusses a situation that significantly affected their life or set them on a new direction. This should be used for changes in a participant's life without placing value on what the change meant.
Help/support	Participant discusses how others demonstrated or failed to demonstrate support to address needs.
Cultural context	Participant discusses or alludes to structures, norms, cultural values, and other systemic external factors that affect her behavior, mobility, or life choices. If participant discusses relationships or feelings toward the community without discussing norms or systems, do not code (instead, code Relationships before or after).

Negotiating Needs      Participant discusses the process of balancing beliefs and wants along with navigating daily survival needs. If a participant discusses personal beliefs that affect survival needs or psychological needs, apply code.



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