Mujeres Latinas en Acción

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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The visionaries who planted the seeds of Mujeres Latinas en Acción more than 25 years ago in Pilsen, one of Chicago's South Side neighborhoods, probably never imagined that it would blossom into the national model of empowerment for Latinas that it is today. "Over the years, we have come to believe literally on the verge of closing the doors to being recognized both locally and nationally for our work," explains former board President Marta Cerda. "We are regularly called upon to share our knowledge and expertise with others."

Through its early days assisting runaway teenage girls and victims of domestic violence, Mujeres soon became known as a place of refuge for women in crisis. By helping women learn to draw on their own strengths, the founders of Mujeres began to make a contribution to their community and the Agency grew quickly. But on the way to becoming the model for the Latina-centered social service agency that it is today, Mujeres had to overcome obstacles and resistance. Alicia Amador, who has been on staff for over 20 years at Mujeres, describes some of these early struggles.

"Leaders took a lot of heat from the community because either you're a radical or you're not or you've got part of the community that said yeah, you have to be more political and then you had the part that said no, you have to work with the church. Well, the church is fine. I will never condemn the church. They do wonderful things and they helped my family in times of need, but there are other avenues that can work along with the church. It had a lot to do with the fact that people were noticing that Mujeres was becoming a name and becoming more credible. So the rumors began to fly about who we are and what we do. They're Communists, they're Lesbians, they want to break up families, they're telling women to leave their husbands and join their ranks and then they're militant" and everything that can possibly be said about a woman's organization was said then in those days."

But as Amador describes, the leadership of Mujeres, "just never stopped." Past President and six year Board member Sylvia Puente characterizes the evolution of Mujeres as cyclical. "The organization grew from its tumultuous early years of financial difficulties and program development, to creating a strong service delivery structure." Today, Mujeres' program areas include Latina leadership training, homelessness prevention, parent support, and domestic violence and sexual assault counseling and prevention.

The services of the domestic violence program are in high demand and range from crisis intervention, court advocacy, individual counseling, group counseling and referrals to shelters. The work of counselors and advocates fosters a setting in which Latinas can explore alternative choices, make informed decisions, and develop positive self-esteem. Mujeres offers women a comfortable place where they can seek help from staff who understand what it means to be survivors of domestic violence and also Latina.

Because weekends and evenings are times when most incidents of battering occur, Mujeres has a 24 hour Domestic Violence Hotline. The Hotline breaks down the barriers that women confront when feeling alone and isolated. Counselors answer calls from their homes, and provide crisis intervention, advocacy, support and education. Initiated in 1993, Mujeres' program for victims of sexual assault offers assessment, crisis intervention services, community education and advocacy.

In addition to providing services to women in crisis, Mujeres offers work training, recreational and leadership programs for youth in the community, parent support programs and other programs that contribute to women's and children's positive growth and development. ParenTeen, for example, targets the special needs of teen parents and has been a joint project with Alivio Medical Center. Services include weekly home visits and case management to nurture the bond between a mother and her children. This work is carried out by paid staff, but also "comadre" volunteers. An after school program offers children in the community a safe place to learn and play while parents are at work or school. Mujeres' Latina leadership program is designed in two phases to help Latinas identify and then exercise their leadership abilities. The concept has taken hold at such places as local churches where groups have been formed and are awaiting classes.

Mujeres also undertakes policy analysis and advocacy on behalf of their constituency. They maintain relationships with community-based city and state-wide services and advocacy groups. In many settings such as advisory committees, advocacy networks, and coalitions, Mujeres is the only voice for Latinas and their families.

As the programs and services capture the attention of those seeking to help women become more self-reliant, over the years Mujeres staff have been asked to lend their expertise to a variety of programs and projects beyond the agency's home. You can find them chairing the Violence on Women Committee of the Mayor's Advisory Council on Women's Affairs; as active participants in the Illinois Family Violence Coordinating Council, the Pro-choice Alliance and the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network. Mujeres representatives have also worked with the Cook County States Attorney Office in task force groups focused on sexual assault and...
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is defined as abuse committed against an adult or fully emancipated minor who is a spouse, former spouse, cohabitant, former cohabitant, or a person with whom the suspect has had a child or has or has had a dating or engagement relationship.

According to the FBI, as many as 6 million women are abused by their partners each year. A woman is battered every 15 seconds. (NOW Activist. November, 1991)

One out of every two American women will be physically abused at some time in her relationship lifetime. (The Battered Woman's Survival Guide, 1990)

Battering is the major cause of serious injury to women in America, more than auto accidents, muggings and rapes combined. (The Lipman Report, The American Epidemic of Violence: A Major Security Concern and Public Health Care Problem, December 15, 1985.)

Source: www.stanford.edu/class/fs101/2000/data.html

Violence Against Women Statistics
(Unfortunately, they are just a few of many such statistics)

Violence against women is primarily partner violence. (Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey," National Institute of Justice Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 1998)

Approximately 28% of victims of sexual violence are raped by their husbands or boyfriends, 35% by acquaintances, and 5% by other relatives. ("Violence Against Women," Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994)

Domestic violence often does not consist of a single incident; it is instead a continual state of victimization. (Domestic and Sexual Violence Data Collection," National Institute of Justice and Bureau of Justice Statistics joint report, July 1996)

Domestic violence occurs in approximately 25-33% of same-sex relationships. (NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project; October 1996)

From 1993-1998, women ages 16 to 24 experienced the highest per capita rates of intimate violence (19.6 per 1,000 women). ("Intimate Partner Violence," Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2000)

Boys who witness their fathers' violence are 10 time more likely to engage in spouse abuse in later adulthood than boys from non-violent homes. (Family Violence Interventions for the Justice System, 1993)


An overwhelming majority of rape service agencies believe that public education about rape, and expanded counseling and advocacy services for rape victims would be effective in increasing the willingness of victims to report rapes to the police. ("Rape in America," National Victim Center with Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, 1992)

For more information about the rights and protection of a victim of Domestic Violence see The Illinois Domestic Violence Act Orders of Protection (IDVA).