



# LATINA PORTRAIT

*Latina Queer Women in Chicago*



MUJERES  
LATINAS EN ACCIÓN



[www.amigaslatinas.org](http://www.amigaslatinas.org)

NICOLE PEREZ AND LOURDES TORRES

## *Latina Queer Women in Chicago*

*There is no place for me to be a complete person. In the gay community my Latina identity is left out; in the Latino community my lesbian self is left out. Amigas Latinas is where a lot of us have found comfort, understanding and acceptance to look at ourselves as valuable people.*

A Latina lesbian made this statement at a focus group meeting to discuss the future of Amigas Latinas in 2002. Several other women spoke of the importance of an organization that represented their needs.

One claimed, *I need a group more like me de mujeres humildes, mujeres madres.* Another woman stated, *Until I found Amigas Latinas, I felt that I was the only Mexican American lesbian. It was like going back home, that cultural uniqueness.*

Studies that explore the lives and challenges of Latina lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQQ) women in Chicago are almost nonexistent. Responding to this alarming lack of information, in 2006 the board of directors of Amigas Latinas initiated the Proyecto Latina: Descubriéndonos survey project in order to document and make known the unique experiences and challenges that Latina LGBTQQ women face in Metropolitan Chicago. As the quote above demonstrates, Amigas Latinas is a remarkable organization that is vitally important to the women it serves. Since its inception, Amigas Latinas has established itself as a vibrant and visible not-for-profit organization group that advocates for Latina lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQQ) communities in Chicago.

AMIGAS LATINAS IS A  
REMARKABLE  
ORGANIZATION THAT IS  
VITALLY IMPORTANT  
TO THE WOMEN IT SERVES.

Amigas Latinas began in 1995 as a small support group for Latina lesbian and bisexual women who would meet periodically to provide a safe space and opportunities for lesbians of Latina heritage to gather, celebrate and explore their identities. Although this purpose continues, the organization has expanded to address the issues of bisexual, queer, transgender and questioning people and now also strives to enact social change both within the community it serves and in the larger Latina community. With approximately 300 members, Amigas Latinas works to educate and empower Latina queer women, as well as to educate service providers, the Latino/a community, the mainstream gay community, and legislators about the issues relevant to the Latina LGBTQQ community. As part of this effort Amigas Latinas conducted the groundbreaking Proyecto Latina survey, which is the first project of its kind in Chicago to provide critical information about a community that has been ignored for too long.

### **The Proyecto Latina: Descubriéndonos Survey Project**

The Proyecto Latina: Descubriéndonos survey project sought to identify the unique experiences and challenges that Latina LGBTQQ women face in Metropolitan Chicago. The literature on the lives of Latina LGBTQQ women reveals that this population is underserved and neglected in research studies and publications throughout the nation. In recent years, there has been an increase in data on Latinos/as and on LGBTQQ lives and experiences. However, the data is primarily about Caucasian white gays and lesbians, and among Latino/a publications, the experiences of LGBTQQ women are often ignored. Thus, Proyecto Latina: Descubriéndonos has accomplished the important mission of documenting the experiences of Latina LGBTQQ women in Metropolitan Chicago in order to make visible the specific life experiences and challenges of this population and to better service their needs.

Having run from January 12, 2007 through July 30, 2007, the Proyecto Latina: Descubriéndonos survey project involved the marketing and distribution of an extensive survey tool with 299 questions available in paper and electronic forms in both English and Spanish. The questions in the survey asked women about various aspects of their lives including demographics, issues related to sexuality and gender identity, parenting, physical health and health behaviors, medical services, emotional well-being, and satisfaction with services provided by Amigas Latinas. While most of the survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, women were invited to write in comments following each section. The objectives of the survey project were to:

- Assess the experiences that Latina LGBTQQ women have with oppression, violence, and discrimination;
- Address issues of accessibility (or inaccessibility) to healthcare;
- Address issues related to physical health and health behaviors among Latina queer women;

- Provide information to service providers and policy makers both in Metropolitan Chicago and nationally;
- Generate a number of publications in an attempt to inform a wider audience of these issues;
- Spark critical dialogues and raise consciousness of issues among community members;
- Help Amigas Latinas to identify and meet the needs of its members and underserved populations (i.e. transgender and bisexual women).

For the purposes of this report, however, we will focus on the following subset of information: Latina LGBTQQ women's experiences with racism, homophobia, domestic violence (with female partners), and sexual assault. We will also briefly examine issues relating to Latina LGBTQQ women's overall mental health and emotional well-being.

### **The Survey Respondents**

Three hundred five Latina LGBTQQ participants between the ages of 13-60 years old<sup>2</sup> completed the survey (262 in English and 43 in Spanish). Given the lack of visibility that characterizes the Latina LGBTQQ community, the high participation rate is indeed noteworthy; the survey team successfully rallied queer Latinas to shed light on the problems and needs of the community. The respondents vary in terms of racial/ethnic identity, sexual or gender identity, education, employment, income, relationship status, immigration or citizenship status, age, and geographic location. Almost 55 percent (54.9%) identify as Latina, 18.8 percent as Hispanic, 6.5 percent as Chicana, and 10.1 percent as Boricua.<sup>3</sup> In regard to nationality, 50 percent identify as Mexican, 25.6 percent as Puerto Rican, 4.2 percent as Cuban, 5.2 percent as Central American, 9.4 percent as South American, 2.6 percent as Dominican, and 9.1 percent as biracial/ multiracial. In terms of language, 11.4 percent report that they only speak English, 5.8 percent only Spanish, 74.7 percent English and Spanish, and 25 percent speak Spanglish.<sup>4</sup> In addition, 32.1 percent of survey participants were not born in the United States, 13.6 percent are not U.S. citizens, and 6.5 percent report that they are undocumented. In regard to levels of education, 4.2 percent have had less than high school, 9.4 percent have a high school diploma/GED, 25.3 percent have had some college, and 47 percent have a degree in higher education (25% college degree, 15.9% graduate degree, 4.5% professional degree, and 1.6% doctorate degree).

In terms of how women define their sexual identity, 50 percent identify as lesbian/gay/homosexual, 8.8 percent as bisexual, 6.5 percent as queer, 1 percent as straight or heterosexual, 4.5 percent as uncertain/questioning, and 9.7 percent do not use labels to identify themselves. In the space provided for Latina women to identify themselves in an alternate way, one woman explained that she identifies as a lesbian politically, and another that she dates both sexes but hates the term bisexual. In regard to how women view their gender identity/expression, 9.1 percent identify as butch, 26 percent as femme, 0.3 percent as transgender, 3.2 percent as genderqueer, 14.3 percent as

androgynous (not butch or femme), and 29.2 percent report that they do not use these types of labels. Some participants also added that they identify as futch, tomboy, soft ag, soft butch, gender non-conforming, multi-faceted, half femme and half tomboy, femme butch, and gender fucker. These various gender identities intersect with sexual identity in complex ways.

Although efforts were made to ensure that the survey reached all types of Latinas, the survey is skewed towards women who have higher levels of education and who have access to computers and telephones. While 25.3% of the participants either had some college or a college degree (47%), this is not representative of Latinos/as nationally. According to the National Council of La Raza, in 2005 only 12% of Latinos 25 years and older had received a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, despite the intent to document the experiences of respondents who identified as bisexual, transgender, queer, or genderqueer, as well as lesbians, the vast majority of the women who responded to the survey identified as lesbians.

## The Results

The results of the Proyecto Latina: Descubriendonos survey project reveal that Latina LGBTQQ women in Metropolitan Chicago have had distressing experiences with discrimination, oppression, and violence throughout their lives. The data speaks to the prevalence of racism, homophobia/heterosexism, domestic violence, and sexual assault in women's lives and suggests that Latina queer women experience these harmful attitudes and behaviors from numerous communities and environments. In the survey, participants also identified the devastating impact that prolonged exposure to discrimination and violence has had on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

## Experiences with Racism

In the last few decades, activists and theorists of color such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga and Carla Trujillo have written about the significant degrees of racism from Caucasian queer that LGBTQQ people of color experience. For example, Anzaldúa, Trujillo, and Moraga discuss the practices and impact of racism on queer women of color, particularly on Latina lesbians. They call attention to the many racist and ignorant stereotypes that Caucasian LGBTQQ communities have of queer communities of color, the discriminatory treatment of queer people of color, and the isolation many queer people of color and queer immigrants feel in the U.S. These authors emphasize the vital importance of creating supportive cultural communities within the predominantly Caucasian LGBTQQ communities in the U.S.

The survey gives evidence that Latina LGBTQQ women experience numerous forms of racism in many areas of their lives. For example, instances of racism were identified in the areas of employment, public establishments, from medical and social service providers/institutions, from Caucasian LGBTQQ communities, and in society at large. Latina queer women

reported the following: 71.6 percent of respondents have had offensive remarks aimed at them directly because of their race/ethnicity; 82 percent have been in the presence of offensive, racist remarks; 36.2 percent of women have experienced others avoiding being near them because of their race/ethnicity; and 62.9 percent of Latina queer women reported that throughout the course of their lives others have made them feel that they do not fit in specifically because of their racial or ethnic identity. Similarly, 61.8 percent have been treated unfairly by service people in Metropolitan Chicago (i.e. clerks in stores, servers in restaurants, security guards, etc.) These findings expose the pervasiveness of societal racism, which is often denied in many communities.

Latina queer women have also had many disturbing experiences of racism both in employment and from various institutions and providers. Almost 44 percent (43.7%) of respondents identified unfair treatment by people at their work specifically because of their race/ethnicity. Despite the fact that 47 percent of Latina LGBTQQ women have a college degree (and 25.3% have some college), as many as 40.9 percent of women reported making less than \$29,000 annually, which could also be an indicator of discrimination in employment. Latina LGBTQQ women also disclosed racist discrimination by medical and social service providers/institutions: 19.3 percent claim to have experienced discriminatory treatment by a social service agency, 27.1 percent report instances of racism by governmental agencies, and 17.8 percent identify experiencing unfair treatment by hospitals/doctors or by any medical professional. Thus, despite the implementation of anti-discrimination laws and policies on federal and local levels, racism continues to negatively impact Latina queer women.

The survey data reveals that Latina queer women have many experiences of racism both in interactions with Caucasian LGBTQQ individuals and in predominantly Caucasian queer settings. Approximately 48 percent (47.7%) of Latina queer women said that they agreed (either slightly agreed, moderately agreed, or strongly agreed) when asked if they feel that there is a lot of racism in the Caucasian LGBTQQ community. Similarly, 17.2 percent of women agreed that they are discriminated against because of their race/ethnicity in places specializing in services for predominantly Caucasian LGBTQ communities. In the space for additional comments, one respondent explained that she feels there are very high degrees of racism in Caucasian queer communities. She reported, "I have personally witnessed a number white [sic] queers making really racist comments about Blacks and Latino/as- for example, I have heard people make fun of Latinos for their accent when they speak English, and make really derogatory comments about them being illegal immigrants, stealing American jobs, driving down the minimum wage, etc."

Overall, the data shows that Latina LGBTQQ women have distressing experiences with racist attitudes, practices, and behaviors. Almost 28 percent (27.9%) of women affirmed that others have either threatened or hurt them specifically because



of their race/ethnicity. In addition, 8.8 percent of women indicated that racism was currently one of the greatest sources of stress in their lives. Thus, the survey makes evident that racism is still a pervasive problem for Latina queer women in Metropolitan Chicago and begins to deconstruct false notions of an egalitarian, unified queer community.

### Experiences with Homophobia/Heterosexism

The data from the Proyecto Latina survey project uncovers that Latina LGBTQQ women experience homophobia/heterosexism from multiple communities and environments. In particular, homophobic and heterosexist discrimination were reported in the areas of employment, health care, social services, from Latino/a families and communities, and on a societal level. Latina queer women reported the negative impact that this discrimination has had on their lives, both in terms of the internalization of homophobic attitudes and increased levels of stress, depression, and suicide. They also highlighted the very important roles that Amigas Latinas as an organization has played in their lives; they noted the importance of community and support in the face of such on-going discrimination and when trying to cope with and come out to families and friends.

### Homophobia in Society

Latina queer women revealed that they have been frequently harassed, taunted, and ridiculed throughout their lives because of their sexual orientation. Almost 69 percent (68.7%) of women claimed that they had offensive remarks aimed at them directly, and 84.7 percent reported being in the presence of offensive remarks. Similarly, 53.8 percent stated that others have avoided being near them, 60.7 percent have had others make them feel that they did not fit in, and 30 percent of women have experienced unfair treatment by their partner's family due to their sexual orientation. In addition, 40.9 percent of Latina queer women have experienced discriminatory treatment by service providers in public restaurants and establishments in Metropolitan Chicago, and 21.8 percent of women stated that they often feel disrespected by people who either know or think that they are LGBTQQ. Similarly, 39.9 percent of women reported being harassed (i.e.: name

calling, jokes, fights, etc.) for being or appearing to be LGBTQQ when they were growing up, and 6.2 percent disclosed that they have never told anyone that they are LGBTQQ for fear of the negative impact this could have on their lives.

Latina queer women also reported having experiences of heterosexist and homophobic discrimination in their places of employment. For example, 25.7 percent of women are not out to all of their co-workers and employers, and 32.7 percent of respondents reported that they have experienced unfair treatment by people at their work specifically because of their sexual orientation. In the space for comments, one woman wrote about her experiences with homophobic and heterosexist discrimination in her place of employment. She concludes, "...some of the ones that I've had throughout my professional career have left a permanent scar." These findings reveal that despite anti-discrimination laws and policies and implementation of LGBT sensitivity trainings (designed to foster awareness and tolerance), queer people are still experiencing unfair treatment in the workforce because of their sexual orientation.

Latina LGBTQQ women also cited instances of homophobia and heterosexism in health care and from various providers. Approximately 28 percent (27.9%) respondents have not disclosed their sexual orientation to all of their doctors or other health care providers; of those who have, 13.9 percent reported that upon this disclosure, they experienced a negative reaction that added to the stress of their already-existing illness or condition. Similarly, 17.8 percent of Latina queer women discussed experiencing unfair treatment by hospitals/doctors or other medical professionals, and 15.2 percent reported that their sexual identity contributed to this negative interaction. In regard to experiences with other providers/institutions, 13.1 percent of Latina LGBTQQ experienced homophobia from a social service agency, and 17.5 percent reported experiencing unfair treatment from governmental agencies as a result of their sexual orientation. These findings indicate that homophobia and heterosexism among health care and social service providers in Metropolitan Chicago are barriers to quality service for Latina queer patients/clients; such providers need to be held accountable for their discriminatory attitudes and unfair treatment (perhaps by instituting mandatory sensitivity and educational trainings, developing and posting anti-discrimination policies in public view, creating an accessible and publicized system for filing grievances, etc.).

### Homophobia in Latina Families and Communities

Research on homophobia and heterosexism among Latino/a communities and families documents the prevalence of such attitudes and behaviors among these populations. Many Latino/a theorists allude to the discriminatory treatment that Latina queer women experience from their Latino/a communities and families, particularly when they are trying to "come out" and be open about their sexuality, or when engaging in forms of social

and political organizing. In *Loving in the War Years and Chicana Feminist Thought*, authors Moraga and García are particularly critical of Latino/a-Chicano/a homophobia and heterosexism within the Chicano/a movement. They point out that many Chicanos/as turn their backs on their hermanas in the struggle once they reveal their sexuality. Moraga and García explain how some Chicanos/as ridicule and disrespect Chicana lesbians, and treat them negatively in the hopes of driving them out of the organization/movement, and at times just blatantly refuse to organize with them. In her critique of these Chicano/a-Latino/a liberation movements, García explains how “Chicana feminist lesbian voices were generally silenced... their sexual orientation and lifestyle was not only misunderstood by many within the Chicano/a movement but vehemently criticized by many Chicanos and Chicanas, revealing basic homophobic sentiments.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, both authors expose how Chicana lesbians confront much discrimination and resistance to the incorporation of their identities and issues within Chicano/a liberation movements.

Similarly, “A Look at the Unique Challenges of Latina Lesbians” by Yolanda Leslie Gallegos examines the prevalence and impact of various forms of discrimination on the lives of Latina lesbians. This study explores the various challenges surrounding the experiences of Latina lesbians, with emphasis on the issue of coming out to families. The findings indicate that Latina lesbians are alienated both from their Latino/a communities and from their sexual minority communities; they are marginalized in their own Latino/a communities and are often forced to be invisible in their own homes. This study also found that Latina lesbians often go outside of their Latino/a communities in order to receive validation for their lifestyle choices. Thus, the literature speaks to the prevalence of homophobic/heterosexist attitudes and practices among Latino/a communities and families, and also identifies the very negative impact that such discrimination and rejection can have on the lives and overall well-being of Latina lesbian and queer women.

In the survey, Chicago Latina LGBTQ women reported experiencing homophobic and heterosexist discrimination from their Latino/a communities and families. In particular, Latina queer women have difficulty negotiating familial relationships, disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity, and attempting to organize with other Latinos on political and social issues. For example, of the 32.1 percent of Latina LGBTQ women who were not born in the United States, 5.5 percent immigrated to the U.S. for reasons related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Furthermore, 4.5 percent of women said they immigrated to the U.S. to explore their sexual orientation in a way they could not in their own country and 1.6 percent because they feared for their safety as LGBTQ women in their own country. One woman explained that she came to the U.S. because she did not want to shame and embarrass her family and another because her family did not accept her as an LGBTQ woman.

Latina queer women struggle with coming out to their family members. More specifically, 18.8 percent are not out to their mothers, and of those who are, 38 percent did not receive a positive reaction when they did; 26.3 percent are not out to their fathers, and of those who are, 25.3 percent did not receive a positive reaction; 23.7 percent are not out to all of their siblings, and 27.2 percent who did disclose did not receive a positive response; 5.8 percent are not out to all of their children, and 6.1 percent received a negative reaction when their children became aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity (one woman reported that her children chose to be with someone else because of her sexual orientation); 27.3 percent are not out to all of their extended family members (cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents), and of those who are, 23.2 percent did not receive a positive response. The survey asked women to identify the reasons why they are not out to all of their friends and family members. In response, 13.6 percent of women feel that issues of sexual orientation or gender identity are private and therefore rarely discussed with anyone, 1.9 percent fear losing their children if they come out, 5.2 percent are not out so they can protect their children/family members from being teased or harassed, and 22.7 percent are afraid of being rejected by their friends or family members. One woman shared that she fears hurting her parents and does not want to “rattle them unnecessarily,” another that she wants to “save face” for her parents, and another that she is afraid her parents will not let her be around the younger members of her family. Another respondent stated that she wants to protect her parents from her extended family’s reaction, “They see it as a failure, compared to teen pregnancy.”

In addition, 7.5 percent of Latina LGBTQ women are afraid of potential verbal or physical violence that could accompany disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity, 7.1 percent said it goes against their religion so they keep it hidden, 30.8 percent report that they think most people know but they don’t talk about it, 5.5 percent have tried to come out to family/friends but they make it clear they don’t want to talk about it, and 20.5 percent have not come out to family/friends because they have negative attitudes about LGBTQ women. Similarly, one woman explained that “a lot of people are ignorant, and think lesbians are pedophiles or perverted... I’d rather save myself the hurt.” Another woman also revealed that she has tried to come out to her family multiple times but they disregard it as some kind of phase; they do not believe her when she says she is a queer woman. In terms of the difficulty of trying to balance sexual identity with cultural values, another respondent shared that “There is no option in my father’s family for my lifestyle, no language to discuss it. This makes it very difficult to open up and be myself. I wish there was a way to discuss this and still have respect for their very strong cultural and religious beliefs.” Forty percent of Latina LGBTQ women stated that they do not often get the emotional help and support that they need from the members of their family. As Cherrie Moraga and other theorists argue, Latino/a culture is steeped in Catholic, heteronormative traditions and these often severely sanction homoerotic

connections between same-sex partners. In addition, a reticence to discuss sexuality is magnified when nonnormative sexuality is involved. These factors mean that Latina queer women often need to go outside the family to receive support for issues related to sexuality and sexual identity. Latina LGBTQQ women also reported experiencing unfair treatment when trying to access services from or work with others in the Latino/a communities on political and social issues. Ranging in degree from either slightly, moderately, or strongly, 25.4 percent agreed that they feel discriminated against because of their sexual orientation in places servicing the Latino/a community. Similarly, 53.9 percent of women revealed that they feel that most Latinos/as are not accepting of LGBTQQ women. One woman shared that...

*I find that homo/transphobia is also rampant in Latino/a families and communities. When organizing with my raza for immigrant and Latino/a rights I have encountered much discrimination- in my experience queers are often looked on with disgust, laughed at, or verbally attacked/harassed at events like marches and rallies. At an immigrant rights march last year my partner and I were verbally attacked by another march participants- we were called a bunch of “faggots” and told that queers have no place in these kind of rallies and that we should stick to our “gay shit.”*

The experiences that Latina LGBTQQ women reported in Latino/a families and communities expose the pervasiveness of homophobic/heterosexist attitudes and behaviors. They speak to women’s painful feelings of rejection and isolation when Latino/a families and communities deny them acceptance.

### **Discrimination, Homophobia and Mental Health**

Latina LGBTQQ women experience many forms of discrimination, prejudice, bigotry, and unfair treatment throughout their lives. This prolonged exposure to oppression and discriminatory treatment/attitudes has had a very real and negative effect on the overall quality of life of Latina queer women. The survey data reveals that Latina LGBTQQ women reported high rates of depression (21.1%), anxiety (15.6%), loneliness and isolation (49%), suicide (15.3% with suicidal thoughts and 18.4% who have attempted suicide), poor physical health (12%), poor emotional health (21.1%) and above average levels of stress (47.7%), and also that many have negative perceptions about their bodies and about the potential for change in their lives. Moreover, 45.1 percent of women expressed that within the last twelve months they have felt as though they could not overcome their problems, and 66 percent have felt as though they are not in control of the important things in their lives. Finally, 20.7 percent of women said that either their sexual orientation or homophobia is what is currently causing them the greatest amount of stress in their lives. As an example of the negative impact of homophobia, one woman shared that, “If I was born again, please not as a lesbian... there are so many issues on so many different levels, whether it be career, motherhood, independence,

family, emotional, etc.” Of the women who identified either suicidal thoughts (15.3%) or suicide attempts (18.4%), nine commented that their thoughts of suicide were directly related to their sexual orientation—*anxiety over coming out to family, loneliness of either having to live a lie or keep their feelings a secret, and depression resulting from being rejected by family and friends.* One woman also revealed that she attempted to kill herself because she was “Struggling [sic] with being a lesbian and having to get married.”

Clearly, issues of homophobia and heterosexism are important in the lives of Latina LGBTQQ women in Metropolitan Chicago. In particular, homophobic and heterosexist discrimination were reported in the areas of employment, from hospitals and a variety of medical/social service providers, on a societal level, and from Latino/a families and communities. Thirty-four percent of women stated that at some point in their lives someone has either threatened or actually hurt them because of their sexual orientation, and 22.4 percent reported that they were worried about being physically attacked because of their sexual orientation. Similarly, 17 percent of Latina queer women revealed that they are worried about anyone finding out that they are LGBTQQ, and 67 percent believe that presently, there is much discrimination against LGBTQQ women in society.

### **Experiences with Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault**

Domestic violence and sexual assault are global problems to which Latina queer women are not immune. Beginning with domestic violence, survey results indicate that violence in Latina LGBTQQ relationships is an alarming problem. We have found that Latina queer women have experienced and continue to experience much violence in their lives. Forty-nine percent reported that a female partner tried to keep them from contact with family and friends. Forty-three percent of Latina LGBTQQ women have been pushed or hit by a partner and 31 percent of women stated that a female partner threatened to kill them. In addition, women not only stated that they were victims of female on female violence, but also admitted that they had perpetuated violence. Forty-five percent admitted they had punched or hit a female partner and 23 percent admitted they had threatened to kill a past or current partner. When asked about current sources of stress in their lives, over 35 percent of women indicated stress related to relationship troubles and/or domestic violence.

The survey results also revealed that Latina queer women have had considerable experiences with sexual assault throughout their lives, both from men and from women. Almost 20 percent (19.9%) of women reported being sexually abused by a parent, guardian, or relative (19.9% by a male, 1% by a female).<sup>7</sup> Just over nineteen percent (19.2%) of women have been forced into sexual activity by someone they know (not a partner or relative) (17.3% by a male, 2.6% by a female). In addition, 16.9 percent of Latina queer women reported being forced into sexual activity

by a partner (9.8% by a male, 7.8% by a female), and 13.4 percent of women identified having been forced into sexual activity by a stranger (9.8% by a male, 7.8% by a female). When asked about the main reasons for suicide attempts, of the 18.4 percent who attempted suicide, over 4 percent indicated that these suicide attempts were related to experiences of abuse in their lives.

Although the Illinois Domestic Violence Act theoretically serves everyone regardless of sexual orientation, Latina LGBTQQ women who are victims of violence and assault face many obstacles as they consider whether or not it is safe to attempt to get help. They may be reluctant to seek help because of the long history of racism and homophobia of the police and other legal institutions. Law enforcement agents often do not take complaints of violence from queer women seriously. Many also face language barriers or may be reluctant to turn to the law because of their immigration status. Closeted Latinas might also fear being outed by legal institutions or officers of the court. Additionally, queer women who are not out to their families or whose families are not accepting of their sexual identity may not feel that they can even turn to their families for help. These factors can create a devastating sense of fear and hopelessness for Latina queer women who are survivors of violence. Needless to say, the need for the creation of queer-friendly and queer-competent social services that address violence and abuse experienced by Latina queer women is evident. When asked about their ideas for potential programming, over 20 percent of respondents indicated the need for additional programming and services that queer Latina survivors of violence and abuse can access for support.

### Support for Queer Latinas

Given the pervasiveness of discrimination, homophobia, and violence and its impact on Latina LGBTQQ women, it is important to mention the vital role that Amigas Latinas has played in their lives. This is the only organization in Chicago focused on the experiences and needs of Latina LGBTQQ women. Amigas Latinas runs a variety of culturally specific innovative programs including: monthly discussion groups, reading groups, a Spanish language group for families of queer Latinas, workshops on the prevention of violence against lesbians, a support group for older lesbians and a youth group. Amigas also organizes family activities that are sometimes structured around children since many of its members are parents. Finally, Amigas organizes cultural events, such as dances, performances, poetry readings and film nights, which provide an opportunity for Latina LGBTQQ women to celebrate and share Latina culture.

These activities are vitally important to our community. For example, one woman shared that:

*During my coming out process, the comradare [sic] of Amigas Latinas really assisted me in this process. Amigas has always been like a family for me, they will always be*



*there for women who need a place to be themselves without fear or retribution. The comfort of being with people like yourself is an incredible strength and gives tremendous support! I am completely grateful that Amigas Latinas exists and provides a safe place for women who love women. Thank you.*

Another woman explained, “I am so happy that we have Amigas because it is about me, being a lesbian but also being Latina. Sharing a sense of culture and experiences with regard to difficulty in coming out to family and friends...I have a place to turn to for women like me.” Finally, another respondent shared, “I \*heart\* amigas...I love entre familia! Amigas helped me come out and I’m indebted to them for that. I believe this survey is crucial in improving the queer latina community. We must work to create an [sic] cohesive queer latina community in Chicago that takes a stance and is felt.” Thus, although Latina LGBTQQ women in Metropolitan Chicago reported experiences with homophobic and heterosexist discrimination in multiple environments, many also spoke to the vital importance of the presence of affirming community support in their lives both to help them heal from the impact of such mistreatment and to help them build strength in and embrace all of their multiple identities.

### Next Steps

Now that this essential information on the community has been gathered, Amigas Latinas plans to engage the Latina LGBTQQ community members in conversations about the demographics, experiences, and needs made apparent in this survey in order to empower Latina LGBTQQ women to address the needs of our community. Amigas Latinas is committed to developing intense programming and encouraging programming from relevant agencies around the most pressing discoveries from the survey results. Amigas Latinas is currently initiating and supporting the emergence of three leadership teams organized to respond to the urgent issues brought to light in the survey results. These leadership teams include the following: domestic violence, physical health, and mental health. Amigas Latinas has already recruited trained professionals from each of the above-mentioned areas to help support the development of these teams. Together with the leadership teams, Amigas Latinas will facilitate the development of action plans to tackle the important issues highlighted by the survey. But clearly, Amigas Latinas is only one organization and



cannot address every crucial issue alone. Mainstream Metropolitan Chicago Latino/a communities must attend to the needs of Latina LGBTQQ women within their communities, and concurrently, the mainstream GLBT community must address the needs of queer Latinas. It is also critical that service providers and policy makers are informed about the realities that Latina LGBTQQ women are living in the area. The following recommendations are offered to motivate service providers, local businesses, and community members to defend, advocate for, and act in the best interest of all clients and constituents.

---

## RECOMMENDATIONS

---

### For policy makers:

**Eliminate discrimination through increased community education efforts.**

- Require government-funded schools to include GLBTQQ issues in anti-bully campaigns and education programs.
- Provide funding to ensure printing of anti-discrimination publications in Spanish, which include GLBTQQ issues, and to distribute information to Latino/a-populated communities.
- Mandate government-funded GLBTQQ programs to post information on reporting racial/ethnic discrimination and racial/ethnic hate crimes.

**Develop mandatory trainings regarding domestic violence in the LGBTQQ community for court personnel and service providers.**

- Require domestic violence court personnel (judges, attorneys, victim witness, staff) to undergo training on female to female violence.
- Require government-funded domestic violence programs to use gender neutral language in forms, publications, screening tools, and trainings.

**Increase funding for mental health services in Spanish to LGBTQQ communities.**

### For service providers:

**Implement cultural competency trainings that actively confront and educate providers around not only the unique life experiences of Latina LGBTQQ women, but also on the pervasive attitudes of racism, sexism, biphobia, transphobia, and homophobia/heterosexism.**

- Highlight how negative treatment adds significantly to levels of patient stress, emphasize how such discriminatory attitudes serve as barriers to satisfactory care, and identify how discriminatory and insensitive treatment can in fact worsen already-existing conditions among patients.
- Implement non-discrimination policies and domestic partner benefits aimed at protecting LGBTQQ employees and families.

**Develop programs which both take seriously and sustain a sense of wellness among Latina LGBTQQ women.**

- Conducting such advocacy, for example, could take the form of intensive letter-writing campaigns, media campaigns, and persistent meetings with staff particularly in Human Resources departments. These programs could take the form of community workshops aimed at providing accurate and accessible information on ways to create and maintain physical, emotional, and mental wellness. For example, community providers could:
  - Develop workshops on effective strategies to reduce and cope with high levels of stress, depression, or anxiety.
  - Create educational workshops on ways to take charge of your personal health and overall well-being, and workshops that provide Latina queer women with practical, concrete suggestions to improve their overall quality of life. Queer Latinas are members of both the Latino community and the Chicago LGBTQQ community and as such it is the responsibility of legal, political, health, activist and social service organizations that serve Latinos and queers to address the urgent needs of our community.

Ultimately, it is our hope that the awareness of issues that has come out of this project will hopefully motivate various providers, local businesses, and community members to defend, advocate for, and act in the best interest of all of their clients and constituents.

As one survey respondent shared, “Thank you for putting together this very important survey if [sic] means a great deal to me as a Mexican Latina to know that we are being thought of and research is being put together to better serve us because so many time [sic] we are treated as second class citizens.”

We expect that the dissemination of the survey results and the ensuing activism inspired by the survey findings will contribute to breaking silence, reducing feelings of isolation, fostering feelings of empowerment, sparking community dialogue and action, and creating a safe and just world for Chicagoland Latina queer women.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Queer” is used as a category of sexual identity that encompasses women who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQQ). While the term originally had negative connotations it has been reappropriated by many participants of LGBTQQ communities as an affirming label. In this essay we use the terms “queer” and “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning” interchangeably.
- <sup>2</sup> Data has not yet been analyzed to gauge the interaction of age with other factors.
- <sup>3</sup> Discrepancies in total percentages may occur because some participants did not answer all of the questions.
- <sup>4</sup> Spanglish is the use of both Spanish and English in the same utterance.
- <sup>5</sup> Kohler, Adriana D. and Melissa Lazarín. 2007. NCLR statistical brief: Hispanic education in the United States. Retrieved June 10, 2007 from [http://www.nclr.org/files/43582\\_file\\_SB8\\_HispEd\\_fnl.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/files/43582_file_SB8_HispEd_fnl.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup> García, 1977, 6-7.
- <sup>7</sup> Discrepancies in total percentages may occur because some participants reported experiencing sexual assault from both men and women.

## REFERENCES

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1999. *Borderlands la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria, ed. 1990. *Making face, making soul hacienda caras: Creative and critical perspectives by feminists of color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Gallegos, Yolanda Leslie. 1997. *A look at the unique challenges of Latina lesbians*, MAI 36/02. Ph.D diss., California State University.
- García, Alma, ed. 1997. *Chicana feminist thought: The basic historical writings*. New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, Audre. 1990. *I am your sister: Black women organizing across sexualities*. In *Making face, making soul hacienda caras: Creative and critical perspectives by feminists of color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 1983. *Loving in the war years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*. Boston: South End Press.
- Trujillo, Carla. 1998. *Living Chicana theory*. Berkeley: Third Woman Press.

# LATINA PORTRAIT



Chicago Foundation for  
women



[www.amigaslatinas.org](http://www.amigaslatinas.org)



PRINT PRODUCTION OF REPORT FUNDED BY



2124 West 21st Place | Chicago, Illinois 60608 | O 773.890.7676 | F 773.890.7650

GRAPHIC DESIGNER: María Isabel Ochoa  
Photos courtesy of Amigas Latinas.