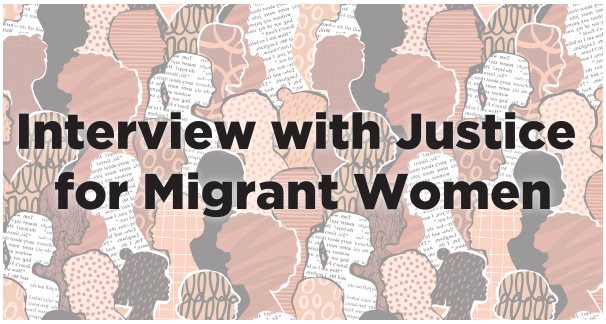
Part 1 - How Language Barriers and Cultural Differences Impact Latinx Survivors

November 10, 2023

Mónica Ramírez



This is the first excerpt of a two-part interview. Be sure to read the second part here.

1. If a Spanish-speaking Latinx survivor wishes to seek help, sometimes they will find that in their communities (particularly rural ones that are under-resourced) they are living in an information desert lacking in Spanish-translated materials. How does Justice For Migrant Women reach out to these people?

So for a lot of survivors who speak languages other than English, it can be a real challenge to find information and resources in their language. Spanish is actually one of the languages where there are more items available such as Spanish language help lines, resources, etc. But as you were saying, there are definitely communities across the country, like rural America, where that doesn't exist. So, Justice for Migrant Women seeks to serve migrant women workers in defending their civil and human rights. Many of those migrant women who we are in community with are migrant farmworkers who live in farmworker camps. So in our work, what it looks like for us to be in community and share important resources and information about sexual violence and other topics, that means we have to go to the farmworker camps. In the state of Ohio, there are about 30,000 farmworkers who come to the state each year. That is where we are based. That is where our headquarters is located. We, along with our partner organizations, go to every single farmworker camp in the state. These camps are hard to find, are often very isolated, and it requires literally door-to-door outreach to leave information so that people know that we exist, that we can help them, to provide resources in their language about their rights and about resources to help them…that's what it requires. It's not this idea that people will just pick up a phone and call us or they'll just show up in our office. That's not realistic when we're talking about migrant community members or even immigrant community members, particularly those who are living in isolated communities like rural America because public transportation doesn't always exist. I think, more importantly, the trust doesn't exist. So, there's a lot of fear around just picking up a phone and calling someone. The door-to-door, human contact is essential for us actually to reach the survivors who we serve.

2. It is important for organizations and service providers to have a Spanish translator in their contacts. However, since Spanish can vary between Spanish-speaking countries in both dialects and country-specific phrases, do Spanish-speaking survivors still encounter difficulty getting their message across even with a Spanish translator present?

First, I think it is important for everyone who is doing this work for us to recognize the difference in the terminology. So, I want to share a little bit about the terminology first. One, it's important for all of our organizations to have access to a

translator, and sometimes our organizations lean on individuals in our offices who speak Spanish to become the translators. When we're talking about translation, that is written. A translator is someone who takes something that is in English and puts it into another language, in this case, Spanish. An interpreter is a person who takes the spoken language of one individual and then verbally interprets that into whatever language. So, there's a difference between a translator and an interpreter.

There's also a difference in how interpretation happens. So, simultaneous interpretation means that, as an individual is speaking, someone is at the same time interpreting what they've said into another language. Then there's consecutive interpretation, which is what many of us have witnessed or experienced, which is when someone says their response, which is in this case Spanish, and then someone, after they've spoken for a sentence or so, will then interpret the statement made by the individual.

To your point, Spanish is very different depending on the region you're from, depending on the country you're from, and in some languages, there are not even words to describe some of the things we're talking about when we're talking about sexual violence. For example, in some of the indigenous languages from communities in Guatemala, or in some of the indigenous languages spoken in Mexico, some of the words that describe the harm that is committed against people…those words don't even exist in their language. So, it is difficult for them to articulate what it is that happened to them, and in particular, when we're talking about a legal or court setting. So, we need to know that as service providers.

For example, in my cases that I've handled representing survivors of sexual violence, I have had individuals say to me that they're being "bothered" at work. That their supervisor is giving them a "hard time" or causing them "trouble". They're not using terms like "sexual harassment" or "sexual violence". They're describing the discomfort and the harm against them, but the words themselves don't exist. So, we as advocates need to help contextualize what's happening so that we can get a better understanding of how we can best serve the individual. That also means as advocates being able to explain to people like the police, or prosecutors, or judges, or whomever we need to serve the individual that that particular language, which may be Spanish or an indigenous language, that the words we might traditionally use in English may not exist. We have to do the hard work, the important work of ensuring that individuals who speak languages other than English can convey what's happened to them and have that experience taken just as seriously as if they were speaking to an English-speaker in English.

3. Depending on a migrant survivor's country of origin, they may have been raised with a variety of ideas and taboos around sex and sexual assault. What are some best practices that organizations and service providers should keep in mind when working with Latinx survivors across different cultures?

I think that it's true in many cultures that talking about sex has been made taboo. People are uncomfortable. They feel ashamed. Sometimes they feel scared to talk about sex and certainly are afraid about talking about sexual violence against them. I think that as advocates and activists, our goal is to make sure that people feel safe and comfortable to share the experience they've had. It's important for us to convey that we're not judging and that our primary goal is to help people get the care that they need, whatever it is that's happened to them. I think that sometimes people are made to feel like what happened to them wasn't so bad, that other people might have it worse. There might be some comparison that happens between their experience and someone else's experience. It's really important as survivors that we make sure that anything that has happened to them, if it has caused them harm or discomfort, that is a serious matter and that we are going to treat that with as much care as we would anything that has happened to anyone else. It isn't about comparing experiences or putting things on a level to decide whether something is worse for one person or not. If it has made someone feel uncomfortable, and if it has harmed, that is a serious matter, and we must treat all of those experiences both as urgent experiences that require care as well as serious matters that need to be taken seriously and addressed in a serious way.

4. Even if a Latinx survivor is fluent in English, do they ever experience a hesitancy in reaching out to the resources in their community, or over the phone, because of fear of being judged due to their accent?

First of all, if someone has been through a traumatic experience, particularly if they are in crisis, they might feel more comfortable speaking in their native language, whatever language is. So we as advocates should be sensitive to that and should make all accommodations to make sure that is possible for them. In fact, it is

important for us to ask people, even if they speak English, what language would they feel most comfortable speaking in? I do think that when people speak multiple languages, and if they have an accent, they might feel like they're being judged, criticized, or not understood. That is why it is very important for us to make sure that we ask people how they would feel most comfortable, so that we can best understand them and help them. I, for example, speak Spanish. Spanish is actually my first language but English has been my dominant language for the majority of my life. When I speak Spanish, I have an accent, so I know that I feel uncomfortable and want to make sure that I can be understood and wonder if people are judging me. So I very much sympathize with that. I think our role as advocates and activists is to ensure that we are doing everything we can to create conditions where people feel safe and comfortable enough to be able to speak with us. That might mean that they speak English, even if it isn't their first language, and they might choose to speak in their primary language with an interpreter. Those are things that we need to make sure are possible.

5. One major element of the journey to healing after a sexual assault is prioritizing mental health. If a Latinx survivor grew up in a community that stigmatized seeking out mental health services, what is the best way for service providers and organizations to meet them where they are?

Not all communities are as comfortable seeking any kind of healthcare, including mental healthcare. So I think an important step for providers when supporting survivors of sexual violence is first to ask what kind of care people need, what kind of care they feel comfortable with, what kind of providers they feel comfortable with, and who they have worked with in the past. That way we can determine whether someone they are already comfortable with or the kind of care they're comfortable with is available to them to support their present needs. I think it's also important for us to talk about mental healthcare as healthcare and to name the fact that we recognize that in some communities and some households, mental healthcare might be stigmatized or maybe it's something that people have never had before. I think it's also important for us to talk about the fact that it exists, why people get it, and how it might be able to help. Certainly, if someone says, "No, I don't want to do that,", we would never push that on anyone. We would never judge anyone for that decision. However, I do think that it is our job

as providers and advocates to make sure that people understand the whole range of care that people could receive and to share with people how to access that care.

The other thing to name, particularly with community members who are low-paid workers or who are living in poverty, it might be very difficult for them to be able to get mental healthcare because not all therapists are willing to take all kinds of insurance and some of them require cash payments. So, it might be out of reach for them to be able to get therapy. We need to know that too because as service providers we shouldn't encourage people to access a kind of service or care if it is out of reach, because then it might make people feel like that kind of care doesn't pertain to them. So, we also need to be thoughtful about researching what kind of free or low-cost services are available to make those real options for people when we're talking to them about the range of care or services they could access.

This blog post was published in The Resource 2023 online magazine special issue on Racial Equity in the Movement.

About the Author:

Mónica Ramírez hails from a farmworker family that settled out of the migrant stream to live year-round in rural Ohio. She is a long-time advocate, organizer, social entrepreneur and attorney fighting to eliminate gender-based violence and secure gender equity. For over two decades, she has fought for the civil and human rights of women, children, workers, Latinos/as and immigrants.

In 2003, Mónica created the first legal project in the United States dedicated to addressing gender discrimination against farmworker women, which she scaled to create Esperanza: The Immigrant Women's Legal Initiative of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In addition to founding Justice for Migrant Women, she co-founded Alianza Nacional de Campesinos and served as President of their Board until 2018. In her capacity as Alianza's Board President, Mónica wrote the letter that was published in TIME magazine from farmworker women to women in the entertainment industry. It has been credited with helping to spark the creation of the TIME'S UP movement.

Follow her @MonicaRamirezOH on Twitter and @activistmonicaramirez on Instagram.