Gender Norms: A Key to Improving Outcomes Among Young Latinas

HISPANICS IN PHILANTHROPY

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Decades of research has found that when young women and men internalize rigid ideals of femininity and masculinity, they have markedly lower life outcomes in a cluster of related areas that include health, education, reproductive health, and economic security.

Yet few program officers or grantees are challenged to do innovative work around gender like they are race and class.

This report, prepared in partnership with Hispanics in Philanthropy (HIP) and Frontlines Solutions, will help funders understand what gender norms are, how they impact young Latinas, and how to adopt an *intersectional* approach that connects race, class, and gender to increase the social return on their philanthropic investment.

But first, a bit of background.

"Gender norms" refers not to physical sex or to sexual orientation, but to the customs and beliefs members of a community share for how to be masculine or feminine, for what is expected of women and men.

Funding and programs that address gender norms have long been considered *best practice* among major international donor institutions like CARE, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) no longer funds new programs that lack a strong gender analysis. The President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has made changing harmful masculine norms a top priority.

Even the venerable World Bank has begun a highly public multi-year effort to put gender norms at the center of gender equity funding for women and girls.

That is because they have found through trial-and-error that it is impossible to create truly effective solutions that overlook or ignore the impact of rigid gender norms. Put simply, addressing gender — like addressing race and class — makes for more effective funding.

This is especially important for young Latinas, who face specific and well-documented vulnerabilities when it comes to feminine norms. Yet it's still rare to find funding or programming for young Latinas that addresses gender norms.

Few social justice foundations today would seek to create portfolios that were race-blind or class-blind, and fewer still would fund grantees that offered race- or class-blind programs, particularly in communities of color. That's because they know that addressing underlying structures of oppression like race and class makes efforts more effective.

Yet most funders still don't consider gender an essential lens for their funding strategy, although — as international donors continue to prove — reconnecting race, class, and gender in a truly "intersectional" approach can dramatically improve efficacy while adding little additional cost.

As funder Loren Harris (an early leader on gender and former director with the Ford and WK Kellogg Foundations) has pointed out, gender impacts every issue funders deal with; yet most funders and grantees overlook or ignore gender norms, or disconnect them from core concerns like race and class.

Now that is finally changing. A core of leading funders like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), California Endowment, Ford Foundation, and Heinz Endowments have moved forward important grants in this area. Leading funder networks like A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities (ABFE), Women's Funding Network, and Women Moving Millions have all published papers placing gender norms at the center of racial, social, and economic justice work.

As this report will examine, young Latinas face special barriers related to race, ethnicity, acculturation (adapting to and internalizing a new culture), and gender norms that can have immense impact on their health and life outcomes.

Such impacts can be magnified in low-income communities, where girls may have the added stresses associated with poverty and/or immigration regimes. In addition, codes for femininity (and masculinity) are apt to be especially narrow in such communities, and penalties for transgressing them harsher.

Given the added risk of low-income status, this report focuses on young Latinas in impoverished environments, as well as on three areas where the impact of rigid feminine norms is broad and well accepted:

- Basic health, including health care seeking and depression and suicide;

- Reproductive and sexual health, teen pregnancy, and intimate partner violence; and

- Education, including school pushout policies, economic security, and STEM

Considering gender norms in funding for these areas could have an especially big impact in improving life outcomes and making funding more effective.

Finally, it's important to note that while this paper is necessarily concerned with issues facing young Latinas, it does not overlook the immense resources and resilience young Latinas bring to surmounting the challenges they face.

A Gender Dictionary

"Gender" is used in multiple contexts. Here's a quick guide.

Gender Equality/Equity
Ensuring equal access to resources, power, and opportunity for women, men, children and families, LGBTQ, etc.

Gender Expression
How we express feeling feminine and masculine through dress, hair style, adornment, posture, etc.

Gender Identity
An inner sense of being male, female, or neither; useful when discussing transgender individuals who feel a conflict between their sex and gender identification.

Gender Lens or Gender Analysis
Being aware of the impact of gender equity and/or gender norms on a problem or issue.

Gender Norms
Socially-constructed ideals, scripts, and expectations for how to be a woman or a man.

Gender Roles
Social and behavioral norms for how men and women are expected to act: being a doctor or nurse, being martial or maternal.

Sexual Orientation
Romantic attraction to members of one or more sexes.

Transgender
Umbrella term for those whose self-identity does not conform to conventional binary woman/man, including those whose gender identity varies from their birth-assigned sex (e.g., transsexual).

1. GENDER NORMS

A. About Gender

Latina/os comprise the U.S.'s largest single racial and ethnic minority, and are among its fastest-growing groups. Yet despite this, significantly less is known about Latina/o youth than their white peers. This is especially true in the area of gender norms, and their intersection with race, class, and ethnicity.

"Norms" are customs or practices shared by a community's members. For example, as the Communities for Just Schools Fund's Allison Brown explains, youth of color who learn to avoid direct eye contact or raising their voices with police are enacting social norms passed down from slavery and Jim Crow to communicate being non-threatening.

The phrase "gender norms" refers specifically to the expectations, beliefs, and scripts most of us have for how to be men and women, for how to be masculine and feminine.

However, gender norms vary among different cultures and subcultures, and some researchers refer to "masculinities" and "femininities" in the plural.

An analysis that seeks to understand life outcomes through the overlapping effect of factors like race, class, and gender is called "intersectional," and studies show it can lead to more effective programs than addressing such factors in isolation.

B. Latina/o Identity

Hispanic cultures have their own distinct forms of masculine and feminine norms. *Machismo* — originating mainly in Iberian cultures — stresses male pride and domination, sexual potency, and benevolent sexism towards and idealization of females.

Marianismo, a newer term for the feminine version of machismo, is connected to religious vernation of the Virgin Mary and tends to stress obedience to males, moral purity, motherhood, and self-denial.

Both *machismo* and *marianismo* are intertwined in *familismo* — the valuing of family ties as central to life.

Although popular culture often uses *machismo* as a shorthand for hyper-masculine and aggressive male chauvinism, historically *machismo* also encompasses virtues like chivalry towards the weak, honor, and the importance of being family protector and provider (attributes sometimes summed up as *caballerismo*).

As with many other ethnic groups, rigid and traditional cultural norms are reinforced by immediate family members, as well as extended family, teachers and educators, social media, clergy, and religious institutions.

Nothing in this paper is unique to young Latinas; on the contrary, studies show that many of the same impacts are experienced by young white, Asian, Native American, or Black women who internalize rigid feminine norms and/or live in low-income environments.

What is unique is the continuing impact of structural racism and ethnic hostility towards Hispanic communities, and the nteraction of immigration and acculturation with traditional Hispanic cultural values. This is what makes the study of young Latinas so challenging, and the need for funders to address the impact of cultural feminine norms so imperative.

In addition, estimates show that about 41% of Latinas/os are under the age of 21. This demographic set to grow at dramatic rates and addressing issues involving them especially urgent.

2. BASIC WELLNESS & MENTAL HEALTH

A. Health Care Seeking

Young Latinas are more likely to act on their families' health needs and ignore their own. Some learn it is wrong for women to seek help outside their family or to prioritize their own health. Such attitudes exacerbate avoidance or delay of health seeking.

Traditional feminine norms that teach the importance of caretaking, self-sacrifice, and self-denial encourage girls to subordinate their own health and take care of younger siblings or infirm elders — meanwhile ignoring signals of pain and illness in their own bodies and delaying medical attention.

As the American Heart Association's "Go Red" campaign puts it, "Hispanic women take on the role of caregiver superwoman, catering to the needs of everyone but themselves….Many Hispanic women…are more likely to take preventative action for their families …[while] completely ignoring their own health, and these acts of selflessness can become deadly."

In addition, traditional feminine norms may lead some young women to feel it is inappropriate to share their needs with outsiders beyond the immediate family (beliefs which can be amplified if they fear government officials, including health care authorities).

Studies show one important factor that sustains such attities is strong belief in *familismo* (even though being strongly family-oriented can help Latinas in other ways). Programmatic efforts to promote femininity that balance care taking and self-sacrifice could help girls' getting medical care and long-term health.

B. Depression & Suicide

CDC statistics show that young Latinas have one of the highest rates of depression of all racial and ethnic groups. While many factors contribute to the likelihood of depression (including impoverished neighborhoods, the stress of acculturation, hostile immigration regimes), gender norms are a key factor.

Young Latinas must deal with pressures to conform to both narrow dominant culture and Hispanic community feminine ideals. As Cespedes and Huey explain, "Compared to boys, Latina adolescents reported greater differences in traditional gender role beliefs between themselves and their parents, and higher levels of depression."

Marianismo vs Malichismo
If *marianismo* is one side of the Hispanic femininity coin, *malichismo* may be the other. The term comes from La Malinche, who translated for Hêrnan Cortês, who destroyed the Aztecs and colonized Mexico. La Malinche carried on an illicit affair with him while betraying her people and was eventually cast aside and given to one of his men. Yet some Chicana feminists have adopted her as a symbol of "bad girl" feminine power: the "fallen woman" who went her own way and owned her own sexuality, defying all the ideals represented by the Virgin Mary and traditional femininity, yet was also deeply victimized by patriarchal male society.

Girls just entering puberty who were born in the U.S. and live in small towns with recently-immigrated and/or low-acculturation parents appear to be especially vulnerable. The result is profound family conflict over traditional *machista* ideals of passivity, obedience, and chastity just when puberty and acculturation are pushing girls into greater autonomy, self-expression, and sexual exploration.

In fact, Gonzales *et al* found that belief in traditional gender norms was related to worse mental health regardless of a young person's sex, level of acculturation, or country of origin.

Suicide is closely linked to depression, and according to the CDC, adolescent Latinas have one of the highest rates of attempted suicide of all groups. 15% attempt to take their own lives (compared with only 10% for white and 10% for African-American girls).

In addition, 26% of Latina teens have considered suicide, with rates peeking during the adolescent years of ages 14-15.

Zaya *et al* theorize that acculturating girls experience intense guilt for transgressing highly-gendered "[c]ultural family traditions [that] socialize Hispanic women to be passive, demure, and hyper-responsible for family obligations, unity, and harmony."

"As the girl's developing sexuality and autonomy is expressed as a prolonged and intense family struggle, management of the girl's body (where she goes, with whom, what she wears, etc.) takes center stage. This conflict increasingly endangers the family's wholeness and the girl comes to feel that extinguishing this struggle through suicide is the only response."

This may help explain why suicide rates for Latinas born in the U.S. are higher than those recently emigrated, or than those remaining in their countries of origin. The likely reason is that U.S.-born girls have an accelerated acculturation, which also generates much more conflict with their families. This would also help explain why suicide rates are higher for Latinas in small towns, where they are likely to be more dependent on their families, than their urban sisters.

3. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & PARTNER VIOLENCE

A. Reproductive Health

What girls believe is considered feminine and womanly has enormous impact on their reproductive and sexual health (R&SH).

Studies show that young women who internalize traditional feminine ideals have lower R&SH outcomes in nearly every area: unplanned and teen pregnancy, HIV prevention and condom use, and sexual coercion and partner violence.

These ideals can be especially challenging for Latinas, who must also deal with popular cultural stereotypes of young Hispanic women as "fiery" and smoldering Latin "bombshells," wielding their youth and beauty to seduce males.

Traditional *marianismo* beliefs also play an important role in R&SH. Latina teens are less likely to carry condoms, acquire sexual knowledge, or have the skills to negotiate safer sex than their white or Black peers. Young Latinas are also less likely than their peers to feel comfortable discussing sex with males, and more likely to defer to male sexual prerogatives.

Because of this, Latina teens have one of the lowest rates of condom use of any racial or ethnic group, contracting HIV at nearly four times the rate of whites [4]. And although teen pregnancy rates for young Latinas are at near historic lows, they are also almost 200% that of white teens. In addition, Latinas are 150% more likely than other girls to have an early pregnancy followed by a repeat pregnancy.

Overall, half (51%) of Latinas become pregnant before 20 — twice the national average — and over half of these pregnancies (56%) are unplanned.

In low-income communities, having children may be seen as proof of womanhood. They may also offer young Latinas one of the few socially-acceptable routes out of school and into a respected social role in areas where decent jobs are scarce.

It is important to note that traditional *marianismo* beliefs also provide important protective benefits to young Latinas as well — delaying the age of sexual initiation and increasing the chances of avoiding sexually-risky behavior.

In addition, young Latinas tend to have better infant mortality outcomes than their peers, which some researchers believe is connected to traditional *marianismo* and *familismo* beliefs — part of what has been termed the "Latino Paradox."

B. Intimate Relationships & Partner Violence

Rigid feminine ideals that promote male dominance and female dependence might be thought to expose women to higher rates of abusive, domineering partners. Yet with young Latinas, that only tells half the story. With Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) *marianismo* and traditional feminine norms *both* protect young Latinas *and* expose them to harm.

Studies theorize that lower IPV rates may be tied to stronger belief in *marianismo* — making young women more submissive and deferential to male partners, and thus generating fewer occasions for violent disagreement or abuse.

For instance, recently-immigrated Latinas — who tend to have stronger belief in traditional feminine norms — tend to report lower rates of IPV than U.S.-born Latinas (another example of the "Latino Paradox").

At the same time, such beliefs also make Latinas more likely to tolerate abuse or sexual coercion, and to report it at lower rates than their peers.

This is one area where IPV funding could improve outcomes by better addressing feminine ideals that encourage Latinas to tolerate abuse, to feel shame over exposing "family business" to outsiders, and to equate attracting an older, stronger, more dominant male partner as validation of womanhood.

A "Latino Paradox" and Chicana Infant Mortality
Researchers have long documented that better incomes, more education, and improved prenatal care are linked to lower infant mortality. Yet Mexican-born women remain surprising exceptions: despite lower incomes, education, and access to prenatal care, they still have better infant health outcomes than their white peers, or even U.S.-born Chicanas. The causes are still unclear, but some researchers consider it part of a "Latino Paradox" (also called the "Immigrant Paradox") which could have important health lessons for all pregnant women and their doctors.

About half of all Hispanic women in the U.S. were born in their countries of origin. For many Latino families which often include undocumented members, issues of immigration are a crucial aspect of an intersectional analysis, and can interact with barriers like racial discrimination and poverty to color nearly every family decision: accessing health care, interacting with public school systems, labor force participation, etc.

The challenges faced by recently-immigrated and/or undocumented women are profound, and because of this, they have rightfully received the most academic attention. However this also has the effect of shaping how we understand all Latinas — even if particular findings are not quite as applicable to (for example) highly educated, high-income women whose families have been in the U.S. for generations.

Encouragingly, many of the groups most focused on challenging rigid masculine norms — including Futures Without Violence, Becoming A Man (BAM), Promundo, Men Can Stop Rape, and Men As Peacemakers — are also those leading the struggle to reduce partner violence.

4. EDUCATION, PUSHOUTS, & STEM

A. Education and Economic Security

Up to 98% of young Latinas report wanting to graduate high school. Yet a third of them admit to feeling that it's not likely — and they are right. One-in-five drop out before completing their education — nearly double African-American girls (11%) and five times that of whites (4%).

About one-third (36%) of young Latinas who drop out report the cause is a teen pregnancy — showing again the importance of funders addressing feminine norms in R&SH and how more effective teen pregnancy programs can have widespread effects.

To begin with, young Latinas in low-income communities often internalize harmful stereotypes that they are expected to be submissive underachievers destined for caretaking jobs. These are also attitudes they may find reflected back at them — consciously or unconsciously — by teachers, counselors, and peers.

Attitudes like these not only make young Latinas less likely to complete their educations, but once they leave school, feminine norms can continue to act like invisible guard rails, silently pushing them toward low-entry barrier, low-paying service jobs, often in fields like health care.

In addition, as one researcher explains, young Latinas are too willing to sacrifice their own academic achievement for romance or marriage, in the belief that for a young woman, boyfriends and husbands should trump schoolwork and achievement.

Even Latinas who do prioritize achievement and career can find themselves stigmatized for being selfish and "unfeminine" because "good girls" should be prioritize their families, children, and men — not their own ambitions.

All these attitudes depress not just graduation rates, but overall economic empowerment. Economic justice funders need to also look more closely at "gender transformative" approaches that challenge rigid feminine norms if they are to create more effective programming for young Latinas.

B. School Pushout Policies

The policing of racial gendered norms through Zero Tolerance, Three Strikes, and other "school push-out" policies have tilted the playing field decisively against young Latina/os and Black students, making it more likely than ever that they may be suspended or expelled.

Over the past decade a wave of studies has established definitively that Latina and Black females and (males) are punished more often and more harshly than their White and Asian-American peers, often for the same infractions.

Leading authorities on youth of color like Kimberle' Crenshaw and author Monique Morris have begun focusing philanthropic attention on how such disparate treatment is due to... (yet another example of the power of intersectional approaches that combine race, class, and gender).

Black and Latina girls who are lively and boisterous are more likely to be perceived as unruly, disruptive, and simply "unfeminine". And Latina and Black girls are more likely to be disciplined for "defiant behavior" or "showing disrespect," which are more a matter of subjective teacher perception than actual rule-breaking.

Often teachers respond by trying to enforce more middle class white notions of passive, obedient femininity, only making matters worse.

As a result, Latinos/as are 1.5 times more likely to be suspended and about two times more likely to be expelled than their white peers.

School pushout policies negatively affect young Latinas just entering adolescence, allowing them little margin for error when navigating the twin tasks of mastering acceptable feminine behavior and avoiding narrow school disciplinary regimes.

C. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math)

Improving the STEM participation of young women of color will require programs and funding that integrate a strong, specific focus on feminine norms. Because as girls enter adolescence, they begin to perceive a conflict between being feminine and being good at science and math, and in this conflict, STEM loses.

During the "gender intensification" years of grades five through nine, girls' STEM interest begins a long decline, until by eighth grade, only half as many girls as boys are interested in STEM careers.

While funders have done important work addressing a host of external barriers like lack of role models, parental attitudes, stereotype threat, and implicit teacher bias, clearly an age-related trigger involving girls' own attitudes, femininity, and adolescence is involved — and under-addressed.

For instance, TrueChild, in partnership with Motorola Solutions Foundation and Health Management Associates, asked young Latinas in focus groups whether they could be feminine *and* good at STEM.

Initially girls declared there was no conflict; but then immediately went on to describe an attractive classmate with long hair whom "no one sees as a pretty girl in that class because she is so smart…she's like a nerd."

When asked specifically if they couldn't be feminine, smart at science and math, and popular with boys, they looked at one another and then burst out laughing, explaining: "Yes, but not in junior high!" Others also noted that as they became more interested in dating in adolescence, they had to "dumb it down" to attract boys or keep boyfriends interested.

When presented with research showing that around third grade girls stop doing as well in math and science as boys, participants' comments included the following:

- "[This is when] girls start giving up [on math]."

- "It's when they start noticing the boys." (All participants agree.)

- "[This is when they] start thinking 'I can't be pretty.'"

- "Girls focus more on 'oh, he wants me to be pretty.'"

The decline in STEM participation is more evident among Hispanics, who are equally likely as whites to major in STEM, but significantly less likely to earn STEM degrees. For instance, in 2010, although Hispanics made up 16% of the U.S. population, they received only 8% of STEM degrees. Yet in what is increasingly a knowledge economy, STEM industries will account for a large share of tomorrow's jobs, especially those with higher salaries and fewer "Old Boy" networks that might exclude young women, or stand in the way of their promotion.

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Recommendations

Young low-income Latinas face many challenges when it comes to race, class, ethnicity, and gender norms that place them at risk for lower life outcomes. Despite this, young Latinas show tremendous resilience in overcoming, surviving, and in many instances thriving.

This report highlights strong evidence from studies that show that addressing gender norms can help improve programs' efficacy when working with young Latinas. Funders in this area should consider the following concrete suggestions:

- More grantee training is needed for grantees to address gender norms.

- Model curricula, exercises, and other tools are needed that grantees can use with youth, which incorporate a strong, specific focus on teaching girls to think critically about rigid feminine norms.

- Funders should consider a national convening to bring together policymakers, stakeholders, and leading researchers to discuss how philanthropic goals can better align with the needs of young Latinas in navigating the effects of rigid gender norms.

- Donors could be encouraged to conduct "Gender Audit"© surveys that measure how well their materials, websites, RFPs, and programs address gender norms.

- An online clearinghouse should be created that centralizes and collates studies, reports, and tools about gender norms and young Latina/os.

- A partnership should be explored with national organizations the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) or Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) to train local groups and parents.

- A national social media campaign could be explored to address the issue of depression among young Latinas, focusing on the impact of the gender role expectations.

- More "2Gen" programs that address parents *and* youth as the unit of intervention should be developed for grantees to use.

- Funders should implement a series of RFPs to support empirical research focused on examining gender norms and their relationship to Latinas' developmental outcomes.

B. In Closing

This report has been offered as a snapshot of the huge impact gender norms play in the lives of women — and young Latina women and girls specifically. It has provided broad strokes of issues that often have complex historical and cultural roots. The literature is both wider and deeper than we have communicated in such a brief report.

With that said, we sincerely hope this paper is the beginning of a dialogue that can unpack, challenge, and positively influence how gender is understood and enacted in the lives of young Latinas.

Too many funding priorities and programs aimed at improving their lives ignore the impact of feminine norms, and the needs and pressures young women of any race or ethnicity may experience when it comes to living up to communal expectations of womanhood.

The "gender vacuum" around young people of color in research, policy, and programs that leading authority Dr. Hortensia Amaro first decried in 1994, more than two decades ago, still exists today. It should not.

Just like the dream deferred described by Langston Hughes, a dialog about young Latinas that continues to be deferred will have significant negative consequences.

An intersectional understanding of gender, race, and ethnicity, and class must become the new standard for "best practice" if funders are truly to have the deepest possible impact on improving life disparities among young Latina women and girls. We can no longer wait.

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