

## **“MU-HERSTORY”**

In June of 1995 the Latin American Coalition to End violence against Women and Children (LACEV) organized “*The 1<sup>st</sup> Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Encounter*” and later on “**De Mujeres**” **Post-Encounter** in January of 1996. Both events brought together approximately 650 women and 150 children from across Ontario, to participate in a wide array of workshops, forums, group discussions, panels, artistic exhibitions, cultural presentations and Press conferences.

Along with the strong enthusiasm and wealth of information and experiences exchanged by many women and their children, the *Encuentros* left behind a report that outlines several solid recommendations to further advance the status of Latinamerican and Caribbean women in our community. Since then, LACEV’s members have been challenged to fulfil these recommendations, with the support and assistance of several partner agencies and women’s organizations at the local, provincial and international levels. We have held several consultations in small and large groups of women and service providers in the community. Such consultations have enabled us to assess the feasibility of implementing one of the most important recommendations of the *Encuentros* – our “dream organization” – an organization that includes, widely represents, supports and advances Latin American and Caribbean women in Ontario.

It is deemed essential for Latin American women to come together in a broader organization that will tap into our own vast human resources and rich potential. We are therefore evolving into an organization that will make use of the quality professional expertise and the immense wealth of talents, skills and energy already available in our community, to support women who are marginalized and who have difficulty in accessing culturally appropriate services and information. MUJER is aiming to create bridges amongst the incredible diversity that is present in our community, be it generational, ethnic, racial, cultural, social or economical.

In June of 1997, a Steering Committee was established in consultation with LACEV’s members and women activists from the community. Its mandate was to initiate the development of the framework, mission and philosophy for our “dream organization”. In November of 2001, the Committee held a large consultation with women in the community to set some priorities around services, programs and activities for the organization. It was once again evident the need for taking a leading role in voicing the needs of Latin American and Caribbean women in the community.

In January 5 of 2002, the Steering Committee was officially established for “MUJER”. It has since incorporated as a non-profit organization (September 02). In the prevailing political and economic climate, we are confident that by channelling Latin American women’s organizational skills, professional knowledge and life experiences, we will be able to contribute to the survival and growth of our own community, and also to the enrichment of the Canadian society at large. May this be the beginning of MU-JERSTORY !

*From LACEV to MUJER. April, 2003.*

## **Background**

The Latin American Coalition to End Violence against Women and Children (LACEV) is a non-profit network of agencies, individuals and organizations. LACEV was established in June 26, 1991 and incorporated in 1993. **Our mission** is to work towards ending Violence against Women and Children in the Latin American and Caribbean community in southern Ontario, especially the larger population living in Toronto.

The Coalition's **mandate** includes:

- a) To work towards the eradication of violence in the Latinamerican community by creating a network of support systems for women and children victimized by violence.
- b) To carry out public education activities and training for Front-Line workers, women Victims of violence and general public
- c) To develop and implement advocacy strategies, and to network with specific organizations on issues of violence against women and children.

LACEV is a unique coalition of women and men from 22 countries with culturally, racially and economically diverse backgrounds- from Central, South American and Caribbean Spanish-speaking countries - who share a common goal. LACEV receives the support, through its membership of approximately 45 community-based organizations. Members represent the perspective and expertise of professionals, community activists and survivors.

## **Our Philosophy**

As women from Latin America we recognize that the majority of women suffer exploitation, discrimination and marginalization in a society that grants power and privilege to men (patriarchy). As women, we find ourselves subordinated and limited in our individual and social duties. We also recognize that despite the unification of women on the basis of our gender, there are social, cultural and economic inequalities that may allocate certain privileges to some women and not to others.

Our organization deems essential, women's holistic development, to be rooted in women's own realities. In our work, we place emphasis on women's rights and the freedom that women are entitled to in all aspects of her life (public and private).

Our practice is guided by building equality and by the fight to eliminate and prevent the different forms of oppression that affect women. Our principles are based on the belief that to the extent that women achieve equal participation, we will enjoy the benefits that such participation might generate. It is only that we will also start planting the seed of a new society, which respects differences, has greater tolerance towards diversity, and solidarity of gender and democracy.

## Our Work/Strengths

From its inception, LACEV has developed and delivered prevention/educational programs, and has provided formal and informal services on violence against women and children, which address the safety and well-being primarily of Spanish-speaking women and children living in southern Ontario (with a focus on Toronto & GTA).

The **strengths** of the Coalition has become apparent throughout its 12 years of incessant work, at different levels:

- a) With women and families victims of violence and abuse
- b) With front-line workers and service providers in the social, housing, protection, legal and health areas
- c) With researchers and academics interested in issues affecting our community
- d) With government representatives, funders and sponsor organizations
- e) With other ethno-specific, and gender specific organizations and community based agencies and networks
- f) With the Latin-American community and the community at large at the local, provincial and international levels

Thus, the **work** of the Coalition has been critical in:

→ Providing **prevention and education** workshops, seminars, training and public education to more than 2,500 Latin American and Caribbean women and men

→ Developing and delivering **bilingual public education campaigns** through the media (radio, TV and ethno-specific community newspapers), educational sessions, forums, conferences, public speeches and presentations

→ Developing an **analysis of the impact of violence** on Latin-American women's lives and their children, from a cultural, feminist and anti-oppression perspective, not only for the Spanish-speaking community, but for English-speaking public at large

→ **Training** more than 620 front-line workers on the issues faced by Latin-American women and families victims of violence who are now living in Canada and the direct links to the **health and well-being** not only of women and children themselves, but of the community at large

→ Developing new strategies for the delivery of **quality culturally appropriate and effective** services, including educational programs, focus groups, support services (over the telephone), referrals and advocacy/escort for abused women and children, and those at-risk

→ Creating **new knowledge** through research **and information/education tools** to enhance peoples' understanding of the current issues faced by Latin American women and their families, from the global perspective. This includes **bilingual** audio-visual and print materials as resources for educational purposes.

→ Providing a **support network** for front-line workers, social workers, therapists, legal/health workers, volunteers, activists and advocates on issues of violence/trauma and abuse in the Latin American community

→ Establishing successful **partnerships and collaborations** with an increasing number of organizations, cross-sectorial agencies and networks within and outside the Spanish-speaking community and at the local, national and international levels

*From LACEV to MUJER. April, 2003.*

## **Chronological Overview of our Projects:**

### **1991**

***“Myths and Realities of violence Against Women and Children”***. A series of four full-day training workshops directed to front-line workers, volunteers and victims of violence working with and for the community in the legal, housing, health and social services. Funding provided by Ministry of Community and Social Services.

### **1992**

- Publication of a training manual ***“Myths and Realities of Violence Against Women and Children: Training Workshops for Prevention”***, based on contents and methodology used during the trainings.
- ***“Working towards the eradication of Violence in the LA Community”*** Three training workshops, LACEV’s Logo and a Directory of Services, organizations and member agencies was produced. Funded by Ministry of Social Services

### **1993**

- ***“Listening to the Voices of Our Women”***. Fifteen workshops were provided for women connected to member agencies of LACEV. Funding provided by Ministry of Citizenship.
- ***Presentation at the United Nations Human Rights Commission***, held in Vienna, Austria. The Tribunal on Violence against Women heard LACEV’s delegate in the deputation to denounce the case of Graciela Montans.
- ***“Educational Campaign on Violence in LA community”***. Two community forums to raise awareness and change attitudes and responses towards issues of violence. Strategies for further improvement of services, response and intervention were also developed. Funding provided by Ministry of Citizenship.
- ***“Wife assault and Sexual Assault Prevention Initiatives”*** Consultation on issues of access, accountability, approach and coordination of the initiatives. Funded by Ontario Women’s Directorate.
- Between 1993 and 1995 LACEV lead and collaborated with several organizations in the defense and prosecution of the ex-husband Graciela Montans. Ms Montans was an Uruguayan mother of three brutally assassinated by her estranged husband. He was convicted to 8 years in prison with possibility for parole at 2 1/2 years, under the allegations of provocation. The Coalition actively participated in denouncing the existent gaps in the protection, justice and health systems in failing to provide appropriate support to Ms Montans and her three children. As a result, several changes to the legislation were recommended in using provocation as grounds to reduce sentence.

### **1994/95**

- ***“Linking Poverty and Violence”*** A two day seminar with leaders of women’s groups and members of LA community. The project included two workshops on economic development where 50 Latin American women learned about the connection between poverty and violence and ways to achieve prosperity in their life. Funded by Ontario Women’s Directorate.

*From LACEV to MUJER. April, 2003.*

- Four members of LACEV participate in *Latinamerican Feminist Encounter* held in El Salvador.
- **“Psychological Effects of Violence on Us”** A retreat for health professionals and social service providers. It increased knowledge and skills on the psychological impact of WASA on women’s lives and on front-line workers themselves. Funding provided by Ministry of Health.
- Organized *First Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Encounter* a province wide event held in June 16-18 in Toronto. Six hundred and fifty (650) women and 150 children attended a wide range of activities including educational workshops, self-help workshops, forums, discussion groups, panels, arts exhibits, cultural and artistic presentations. Funded by the Ontario Women’s Directorate, Women’s Health Bureau, MOH and the City of Toronto, Breaking the Cycle of Violence Program. Some of the most important concerns for women at the Encounter and post Encounter were: **Isolation, immigration issues, lack of sensitivity in the issues of violence, lack of access and opportunities in jobs and career, not access to daycare for children not an adequate support by front – line workers.**

### 1996

- *The MUJERES Post-Encounter.* A follow-up review on many of the recommendations from the Encounter (see above) with the participation of 120 women and 45 children. Funding from the Ontario Women’s Directorate, the Minister of Health and the City of Toronto, Breaking the Cycle of Violence Program
- A one – hour video called **“Un Comienzo sin Violencia” (A Beginning without Violence)** in Spanish with English sub-titles produced by Partnership Against Abuse, in a collaborative between LACEV, St. Joseph’s Women’s Health Centre, Working Women Community Centre, Centre for Spanish-speaking Peoples. The project was directed to educating the community on pregnancy and abuse. The video was aired on Rogers Cable. Funding through Partnership against Abuse, Ministry of Citizenship.

### 1997-98

- **“Pregnancy and Abuse Project,”** with the above-mentioned partnership, a series of educational workshops directed to women and teenagers, using the video “ A Beginning Without Violence” as a central educational tool in opening the discussion about these issues. Funded by Ontario Women’s Directorate
- **“HIV and LA Women”**, LACEV work together with the above-mentioned partnership, in a 30 Minutes video on HIV positive on women in our community
- **“Estas Embarazada?”** (Are you Pregnant?). A collaborative for the development of a brochure to raise awareness on issues of pregnancy and abuse. This pamphlet was later translated into 6 different languages, including English, French, Portuguese, Tamil, Polish and Mandarin

### 1998-99

- *No (WO)men’s Land* – A research study focused on exploring and documenting the impact of violence on Latin- American women who are sponsored by a partner and find themselves in abusive situation and without immigration status. Funding was provided by the CAW- Social Justice Fund

*From LACEV to MUJER. April, 2003.*

- ***“Advocacy on Violence”*** A video and training Manual on issues faced by women victims of violence for volunteers escorting women through the courts and justice system. In collaboration lead by Women Abuse Council, the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre, Working Women Community Centre, 519 Community Centre, Thornhill Community Centre, and Gypsy Production. Funding provided by City of Toronto, Breaking the Cycle of Violence Program

## **1999-2000**

- ***“Recargando Energias”*** A collaboration between Women’s Health Centre, SJHC, Mental Health Clinic of Toronto Western Hospital, Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic and the Centre for Spanish-speaking Peoples. More than 30 front-line workers in the health, counselling, legal and social service area participated in a full-day discussion and training on issues related to secondary trauma (vicarious trauma)
- Media Campaign ***“Stop Violence in the LA & Caribbean Community”***, which included the production of a brochure in Spanish. In addition, we conducted two workshops for women who are leaving abusive situations focused on gender inequalities and self-esteem and the impact on children who witness violence. Funding provided by Ontario Women’s Directorate.

## **2000–2002**

- ***The Sexual Exploitation of Latin American Women*** – A research study focused on exploring the issues and developing recommendations for legal, social and health support needs of women on working permits employed in the adult entertainment arena. Funding provided by the CAW- Social Justice Fund
- In Partnership with the Lighthouse Family House, the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples and Centro Esperanza Peru, LACEV organized a fundraising campaign in support of a literacy project for women in Chiclayo, Peru.
- In partnership with Women Abuse Council and Education Wife Assault we developed ***“Beyond T/Her Needs”*** a full-day training on the effects of secondary trauma for front-line workers on the legal, social, health and housing arenas.
- A series of consultations with LACEV membership, supporters and LA women in the community were held. The last consultation was held on November 2001 to gather information about the needs and expectations for a women’s organization.

## **2002-2003**

- In January 5 of 2002 “MUJER” was officially established, with a Steering Committee of 8 members who have intensively worked over the past 5 years in the development of the organizations’ philosophy, mandate, mission, and general objectives.
- ***“Violence against LA & Caribbean Women in the New Millenium”*** A series of four full-day training seminars directed to front-line workers and volunteers providing legal, housing, crisis, mental health, and social services. Funding provided by United Way.

*From LACEV to MUJER. April, 2003.*

## **LACEV/ MUJER Partnerships & Collaborative Work:**

The Coalition's membership includes women from 22 Central, South American and Caribbean Spanish-speaking countries and is comprised of survivors of violence, professionals working in the field and advocates/activists, there are approximately 45 member agencies represented

Over the past 13 years, LACEV has collaborated on numerous initiatives with organizations such as: Education Wife Assault, METRAC, Working Women Community Centre, the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples, Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, Women Abuse Council, National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Ontario), Catholic Children's Aid Society, Ontario Women's Directorate, Metro Men Against Abuse and the White Ribbon Campaign, Canadian Council for Refugees, OCASI, Ontario Immigrant and Visible Minority Women's Organization and the Multicultural Coalition on Violence against women, among others.

## **Volunteers at LACEV/ MUJER:**

Volunteers have been the major work force for LACEV & MUJER, they come in all sizes and shapes, they are women and men. They have been giving essential assistance to Latin American women and children by providing escort support to appointments, translation and interpretation and practical support. Volunteers also collaborate in developing information/ education workshops and group facilitation and in organizing open forums and other public events. Their commitment, experience and enthusiasm form the backbone of the organizations's fundraising efforts, its strong voice and participation in events at the local/national levels, as well as in the work developed by the different committees.

Volunteers become familiar with access for clients, or connect clients to, an extensive pool of internal and external resources on employment, training opportunities, and violence against women programs and services specifically geared to meeting the needs of Latin American women. Further, volunteers at LACEV/MUJER acquire skills, experience and knowledge in office management, computer systems, outreach, and community development, as well as in building capacity as organizations and individuals members of our community. We are extremely thankful for the incredible enthusiasm, commitment and hard work of ALL our volunteers!