



Latina Women in Canada: A Glimpse into Their History and Experiences



Acknowledgement

This resource has been developed under the project **Building Anti-Racist & Trauma-Informed Practices**. We would like to acknowledge our partners and advisory team of survivors with lived experience of GBV who contributed their guidance to this resource.



CSSP

Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples

CGHH

Centro para Gente de Habla Hispana

Disclaimer: The story presented here is a fictionalized account based on the real-life experiences of gender-based violence survivors. It is presented for educational purposes and does not depict the experiences of any specific individual.

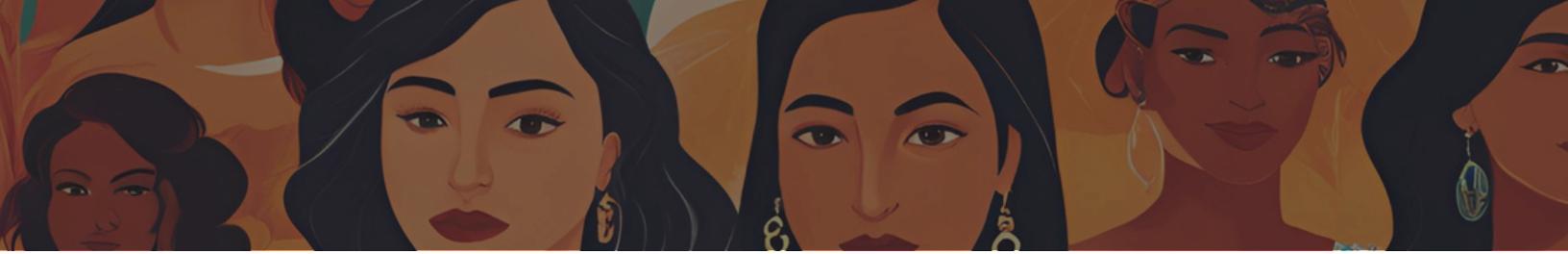
To cite this resource: WomanACT. (2025). *Latina women in Canada: A glimpse into their history and experiences*. <https://womanact.ca/publications/latina-women-in-canada-a-glimpse-into-their-history-and-experiences/>

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This project is funded by:



Publication Date: January 30th, 2025



Colonialism, Neoliberalism, and the Fight for Gender and Racial Justice Among Latina Women in Canada

The colonial history of Latin America means that Latin American communities in Canada are a mix of Indigenous, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and European ethnicities and cultures. Colonial practices that erased the diversity of Latin American communities and created racial and gender inequalities are still happening today. Neoliberal politics may treat diverse groups as if they are all the same, while, at the same time, create divisions by making groups compete against each other for resources.

Neoliberalism and colonialism have widened class divides in Latin America, creating the highest income inequality in the world. In Canada, there is also the false perception that immigrant and minority communities take resources from “real Canadians” creating further inequalities.

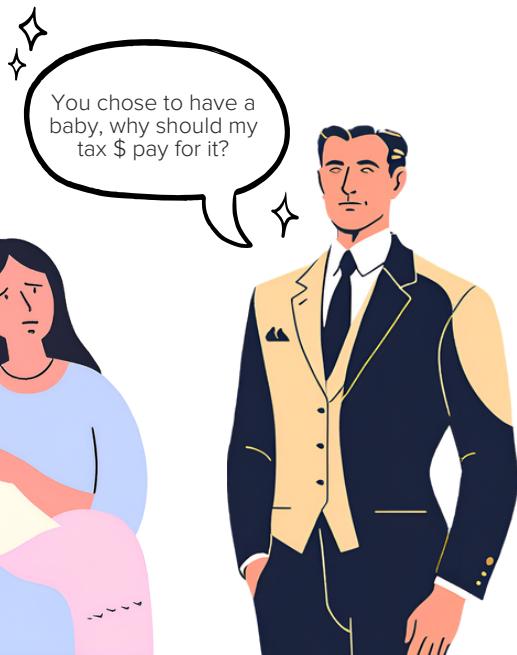
Not the Whole Story...

This report is just a glimpse into the rich and complex history of Latina women in Canada. It is meant to inspire conversation and reflection on the historical forces shaping their experiences. This work builds on the tireless efforts of researchers, activists, and community leaders who have long been advocating for justice and equity. Their contributions remain central to understanding and addressing the challenges faced by Latina women.



Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism emphasizes free markets, individual responsibility, and reduced government involvement in public services. This approach often shifts the burden of care from society to individuals and families, making immigrant families more vulnerable. They receive fewer social supports like affordable housing, healthcare, and childcare, alongside economic hardships caused by low wages, precarious jobs, and privatization of essential services.



Rosa's story

Rosa, a 36-year-old woman from El Salvador, came to Toronto as a caregiver through the temporary foreign worker program. She left her kids in the care of her mother, knowing that the opportunity to work in Canada could help her send money back home to support them.



She spoke little English and, sometimes, this led to conflicts with her employers, who seemed to want things done in very specific ways.

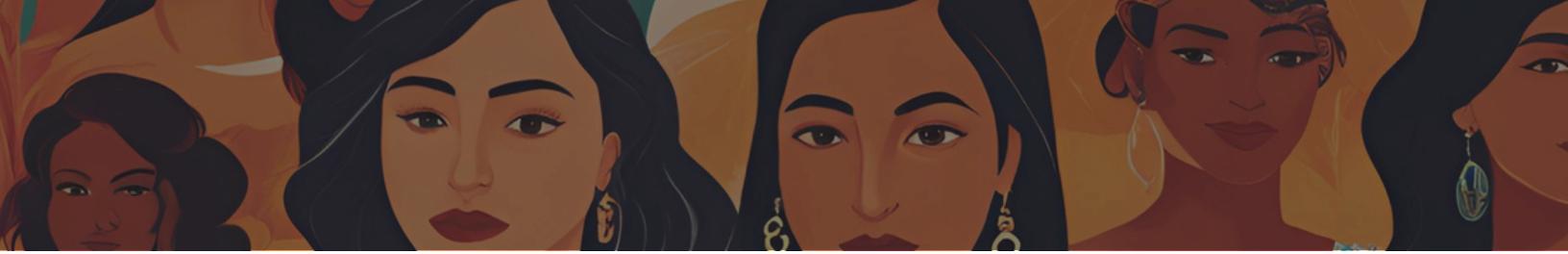


Though Rosa missed her children desperately, she came to truly care for the three young girls she worked as a nanny for. Despite this, her job was demanding. Her hours were long and she often found herself trying to juggle more than she could handle around the house.



Sometimes she chatted with other nannies at the park or school pick up, some of whom also spoke Spanish, but spent much of her time feeling alone.





The Numbers

Immigration from Latin American countries to Canada has been growing since the 1970s. This is due to social, political, and economic challenges in North (Mexico), Central and South America, changes in Canada's immigration and refugee policies, and the connections formed through family and community networks in Canada.

In 2021, Latin Americans were the sixth largest racialized group in Canada, making up of more than 20 different ethnic communities.

Most of the population identifies as Spanish-speaking. In 2021, 3.3% of the Canadian population are Spanish-speaking or descendants of Spanish-speakers.

In 2021, nearly 6 in 10 Spanish-speaking individuals were first-generation and only 1 in 10 were third generation or more. In other words, most Spanish-speaking people are newcomers or the children of immigrants. However, many second-generation Spanish speakers in Canada lose their language over time due to assimilation.

Nearly half (47%) of Latin American women in Canada have experienced IPV. This is likely due to internalized oppression, an effect of living under unfair systems when someone absorbs negative stereotypes about their own group.

In 2020, 9.4% of first generation Latin Americans were living below the official Canadian poverty line and 14.1% of third generation Latin Americans were living below the poverty line. One of the main factors driving the intergenerational wealth gap is the reality that Latin American households are more likely to be single-parent families.



Settler colonialism

Settler colonialism generally refers to a process where the existing (Indigenous) inhabitants are displaced by settlers who claim land and take control to establish a permanent society where their privileged status is built into law. This includes stealing land, exploiting resources, and forcing Indigenous peoples to assimilate dominant settler culture, adopting its language, values, religion, and way of life. It is an ongoing process that continues around the globe.

This place is nice, I'll take!



Rosa's story continued...

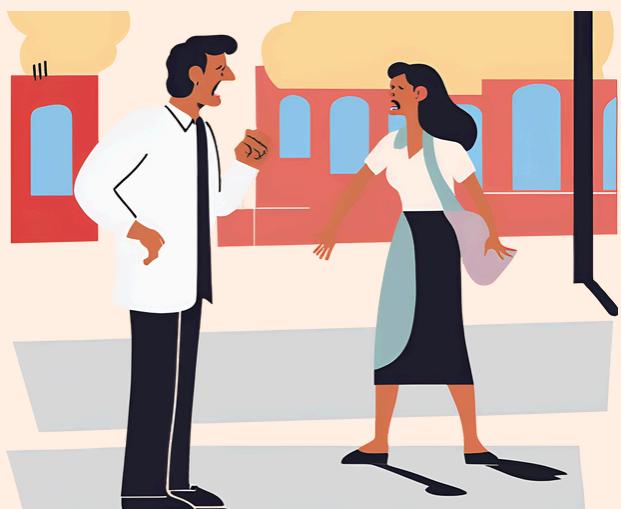
Over time, she became involved in a local Spanish-speaking church where she met Jorge. It was a relief to be able to talk with someone in her own language, and Jorge always made her feel special and cared for whenever they could find a few hours together.

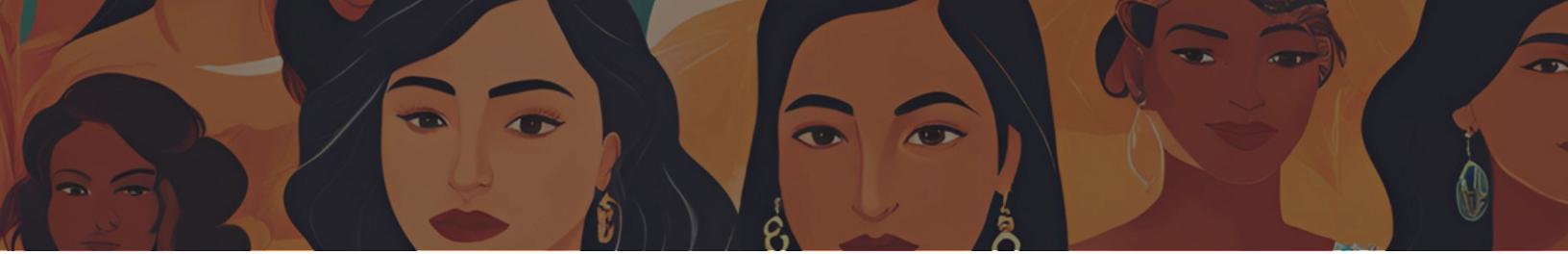


After about six months of seeing each other, Rosa learned she was pregnant. From then on, things between her and Jorge changed. He already had two children and was not expecting to have any more. He pressured her to look into getting an abortion, but Rosa didn't want this.



When Rosa refused to end the pregnancy, Jorge dropped all communication. He threatened to report her to immigration if she reached out to him looking for support, saying that he would lie to the authorities and say she was violating her work permit.





Gender-Based Violence and the Colonization of Latin America

Understanding the experiences of Latin American women in Canada requires looking at how gender-based violence was part of Latin America's colonization.

Toxic masculinity is the idea that men must always be strong, in control, and dominant. It often pressures men to hide their emotions or act aggressively. For example, a man might avoid asking for help or showing sadness because he fears it will make him seem "weak." This is sometimes stereotyped as "machismo" in Latin American cultures. This kind of hypermasculinity isn't unique to Latin American men; it appears in many cultures' ideas about what it means to "be a man." Colonizers, recognizing the need for Indigenous slave labour to extract gold and to work stolen lands, created a campaign of dehumanization of Indigenous men through sexualized torture, raped Indigenous women, and punished non-heterosexuality, including erasing two-spirit people. Christian teachings were used to justify the mistreatment of women and people who did not fit into traditional gender roles in Latin communities.

These colonial legacies continue to shape gender roles and expectations in Latin American communities today. A study of Spanish-speaking women in Toronto found that toxic masculinity, combined with issues

like substance abuse and low-pay jobs, was a reason some male partners used violence. The study shows that ideas about masculinity and unfair systems in Canada shape the behaviors of some Latin American men.

Immigration and labour systems, alongside discrimination from both Canadian society and some Latin American men influenced by harmful ideas about masculinity, play a role in enabling gender-based violence in Latin Communities. Many racialized workers, including those from Latin America, are part of temporary foreign worker programs, like the male-dominated seasonal agricultural workers program and the female-dominated caregiver program. These programs are often unstable, making workers vulnerable to exploitation, sexual harassment, and assault, while also limiting their access to healthcare and community support. Women and gender-diverse workers in these programs often struggle to report sexual violence, discrimination, or poor working conditions. They also face stigma for leaving their families behind, which can make them hesitant to seek help out of fear of deportation, retaliation, or shame.

Rosa's story continued...

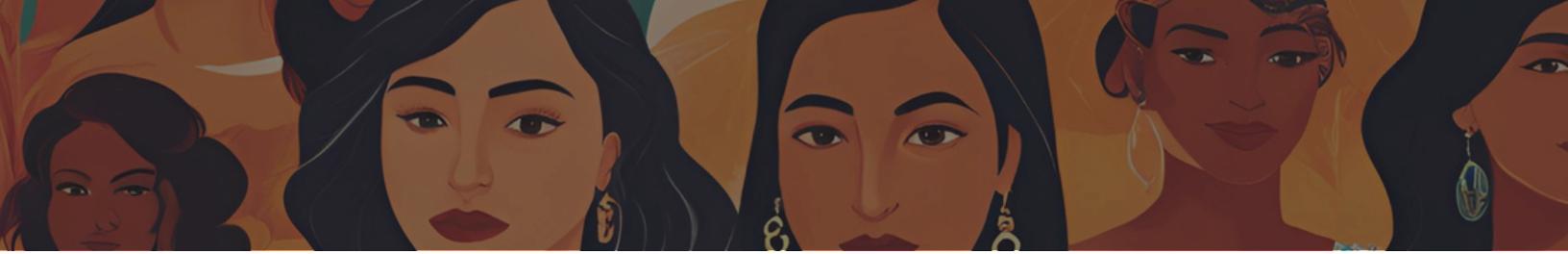
Rosa was terrified her employer might find out she was pregnant. As a live-in caregiver, she would lose her housing as well as her job. She thought about returning to her home country, but that would mean caring for another child with even less income. Since she was on a closed work permit, she could only work for the one family that had sponsored her.

Staying in Canada would require finding a new family willing to sponsor her, which felt almost impossible. Because she didn't understand what the consequences of the pregnancy might be for her work permit, Rosa had not gone to the doctor to get any prenatal care.



Rosa tried reaching out to a local neighborhood organization that supported women in need. The well-meaning young woman assigned to her case was deeply moved to learn that Rosa had left her children in El Salvador to come to Canada.

At the same time, the worker was not familiar with any special services for Spanish-speaking women or with the realities faced by temporary-foreign workers. She was not sure of Rosa's rights in this situation or how to advise her.



Neoliberalism and the Advocacy Chill

In Canada, the shift toward neoliberalism in public policy during the 1990s led to major funding cuts for the nonprofit sector. Latin American women's groups were unable to secure stable funding, and by the 2010s, federal government restrictions created an "advocacy chill," further limiting their ability to advocate for their communities and lead grassroots initiatives.

Neoliberal funding models also pitted Latin American communities against each other by making them compete for limited funding opportunities and treating Latin American organizations as a single cultural group. Often, organizations led by Latin men won funding which meant that initiatives did not represent the diversity of Latin American communities or the needs of Latin women.

Despite the challenges caused by cuts to funding and restrictions from neoliberal policies in Canada, Latina women continue to fight for social justice, leading efforts to push for fairness and equality for their own community as well as others. At the same time, fear-based messages in the news and social media about Latin communities, and immigrants in Canada more broadly, fuel mistrust, discrimination, and gender-based violence, making their fight even more urgent.

This important work, however, comes with challenges. Advocates often face racism, which leads to financial struggles, and they may experience physical and mental health issues due to stress and toxic workplaces. Despite these difficulties, their commitment is key to creating change and supporting their communities.

Community Organizing and Collective Advocacy by Latin American Women

Before the 1970s, there were few Spanish-speaking neighborhoods or services in Canada. However, Latin Americans who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s used their skills in activism to get involved in nonprofit and settlement organizations. Their efforts helped them settle into Canada's economy, advocate for their communities, and gain access to important resources.

Latin American women played a key role in leading and advocating for gender issues both in Canada and in their countries of origin. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women originated in Colombia in 1981, long before the UN General Assembly formally declared it in 1999. The date of November 25th was chosen to honour three sisters who were brutally murdered for their political activism.

Rosa's story continued...

One afternoon, Rosa broke down while chatting with one of the other Spanish-speaking nannies at the playground. Sofia had been raised in Canada, the children of immigrants, and was in a social service worker program in college. Sofia understood the grief Rosa felt at being separated from her children, and the panic she also felt as she tried to navigate her pregnancy in Canada.

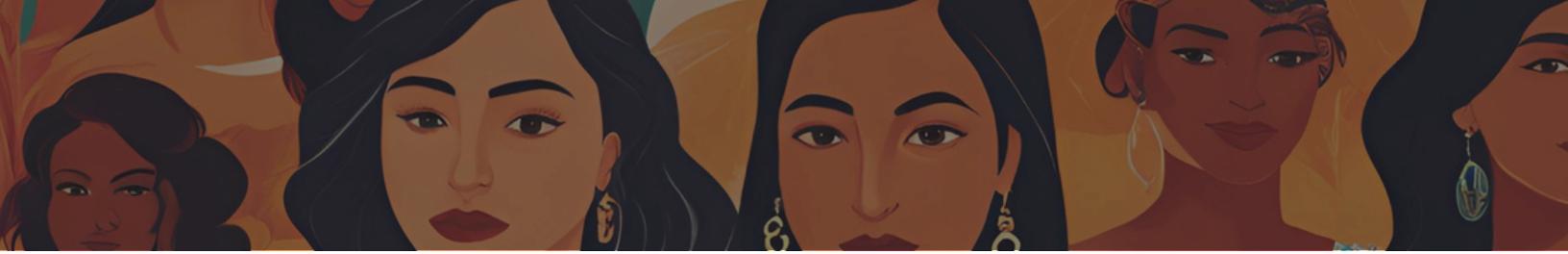


Sofia was able to use the skills she was developing in college to help Rosa connect with services and clear up misconceptions. Together, they figured out that Rosa qualified for OHIP and were able to get her care at a walk-in clinic. Sofia's family, headed by her mother Lorena, was well-connected with the Spanish-speaking community in Toronto.



Through the legal clinic at the Centre for Spanish Speaking people, Rosa learned that she was eligible for maternity leave. With this information, she and Sofia approached the family Rosa worked for and explained the situation. Her employers were not pleased, but did not immediately evict her, giving her time to sort out her situation.





Latin American women who have come to Canada brought with them their strong sense of political activism and social justice. They connected their work with feminist movements in Latin America and the United States to advocate for a transnational and intersectional approach to addressing gender issues. Feminism in Canada has often centered the experiences, rights, and needs of White women, overlooking the challenges faced by women from racialized communities. This focus has left gaps in addressing issues like racism, immigration status, and economic inequality, which deeply affect women of color, including Latin American women.

To address these gaps, Latin American women formed groups and nonprofit organizations focused on ending violence against all women. Recognizing that experiences of violence are shaped by intersecting factors like race, class, and immigration, they collaborated with Black feminist groups to highlight how systemic oppression fuels gender-based violence. These organizations also developed leadership and education programs, empowering the next generation to advocate for intersectional solutions to violence, ensuring that the fight against gender-based violence includes all women, not just those whose experiences align with traditional, White, feminist priorities.

The Latin American Coalition Against Violence Against Women and Children (LACEV) was formed in 1991 in Toronto.

Despite resistance from the leadership of the Hispanic Development Council who did not see violence against women as a priority issue, the LACEV persisted and secured funding for an awareness and education project for community workers on the issue.

Over the course of its history, LACEV held numerous training workshops, developed manuals for community workers, and conducted community-based research. It was composed of representatives from 50 agencies and developed partnerships with newcomer, racialized, and women's organizations.

One of LACEV's biggest successes was a public campaign against the “defence of provocation” in which the defense argued that perpetrators lost “self-control” due to provocation from the victim. The campaign led to a public inquiry that led to changes in how forensic procedures were conducted by coroners on women's deaths.

Rosa's story completed

Eventually, Rosa delivered a healthy baby girl. She moved in with a friend of Sofia's family where she was able to stay on the couch with her new baby. Lorena and Sofia supported Rosa in finding a new family willing to sponsor her to remain in the country.

Rosa was able to care for her own child along with the children she nannied for and lived in a small basement suite her employer provided.



Rosa began to feel better about life in Canada. She connected with other Spanish-speaking people and felt less lonely. She even volunteered for The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, helping other caregivers understand their rights.



Rosa's story highlights the strength and resilience of Latina women who turn personal challenges into powerful advocacy. Like many before her, Rosa faced systemic barriers shaped by colonialism and neoliberal policies, from precarious immigration status to limited support for temporary foreign workers. But through connection and community, she found her voice. Her journey reflects the long history of Latina women in Canada uniting to address injustices, support each other, and push for equity.



