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Latina? Yes! Maria? No!

I felt a freezing gust of air hug me solemnly sending a shiver down my spine as I walked into the girls locker room. I was tired, dirty, and feeling worthless. That day had been our very first game of the season against a team that we knew we had the potential to win. However, we became the laughing stock of everyone. We let ourselves get beat so bad our coach cursed at us for the very first time in years. My teammates and I felt humiliated. However, as our coach walked away it was a slap in the face to hear him say, "It had to be with a bunch of girls". Sometimes I wonder if it was just me who heard the insult. Everyone chose to remain silent and so did I. The baseball players constantly looked down upon us saying softball was not a real sport because we did not have "power" like they did. They claimed that women should feel privileged to be good at "their" sport because if not, we would be shaming ourselves and the reputation of our sport. Our own coach would randomly cut practice early stating that that was as far as we would be able to get within the first month. How could he know that for certain.

Everyone and everything in my life told me that men could always do things better than me. Machismo which was a key part of my culture taught women of all ages that it was a must to idolize the men in our lives. All of this culture talk lead to me believing the exact statement which society had worked hard to drill into my brain stripping me from my power and voice as an undocumented Mexican female. For the next two high school years left I was that quiet girl who was an overachiever, sat in the front row, never asked questions, always handed things in on time, and kept thoughts to

herself. However, I began to change the summer after high school when I asked myself, “ Who will I be tomorrow? ”

I told myself I was going to be the next Angela Davis. As an African American woman, Davis wrote about everything that women had to endure and fight for at the same time. Davis was a very strong woman who risked her so called “freedom” to make others realize the true points of view of African American women that were not created from speculations drawn by the very nation that had once enslaved them. As a woman of Mexican descent it was a given in the Latin community that women were not allowed to speak up against men because men were the ones who had to stand tall secure and powerful. They had to be the strong and the savvy. However, most people within our society do not stop to think that the true strong and savvy were the women who put up with it all and allowed men to be egotistical. Society underestimates women. Have we not proven ourselves strong, savvy, and educated? We work hard to get those prestigious degrees, that society loves so much, to let them know that our knowledge is validated by these degrees. See, I am an enraged Latina who is tired of staying silent. I wanted to stand up to my coach and ask, “ Would having boys instead of girls on your team made you feel less ashamed?” Latinas, as well as other women of color, are continuously being put down, regardless of the number of degrees that they obtain. It is becoming very common for stereotypes to be reinforced subconsciously by anyone, affecting everyone since no one challenges them. Stereotypes about Latinas used all around the world limit their abilities to excel in their communities, which portrays a non progressive society leading to the degrading of their cultural communities.

In Judith Cofer's essay, "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria," she shows us how by simply understanding the background of the Latin women it is easier to understand their unique way of living, and culture. It is when she starts to tell us about her culture, and how simple things such as career day affect her in school because she was made fun of and looked down upon for being different, that we realize how judgemental we as human beings can be. She speaks about how, "Puerto Rican girls always stood out for wearing everything at once"(114) and that is very true. **As Latinas, females were constantly being called out for the same reason.** The way in which bright colors came together to make someone look unique was a part of the logic many young Latinas used. They believe that if they dressed the same way that they dressed up for a party then that would be equivalent to dressing up for career day. Yet what they received from that outcome was a series of not well intentioned comments because the other young girls saw them as clowns rather than human. Cofer mentions that, "As young girls, we were influenced in our decisions about clothes and colors..." (114) by the older women in our families. Latinas are taught to value and look up to the elders in their families. That is why when they feel lost they tend to look all around them and take a little of everything that they see and apply it to themselves. These older women do what they can with what they have and that applies to all of us no matter what stage in life we are. Cofer also mentions how those same women that many look up to send mixed signals that confuse Latinas in their wardrobe choice. We are taught to never show skin when going to church, yet to wear short beautiful dresses that emphasize our curves when going to a party. It is normal to us because of our cultures and the way in which we had to observe to learn.

Cofer analyzes how stereotypes are played out within her community. Machismo in the Latin community views men as the strong and superior sex. This somehow gives them a justification to approach women inappropriately. Men think about the skintone of a woman they look at, and how she is dressed and assume that it is perfectly fine for them to approach a woman in a disrespectful manner, because she is inferior to them. Cofer expresses how men around her thought that Latin women were “supposed to *ripen* and not just grow into womanhood like other girls”(115). The perception men seem to have of Latinas revolves around their sexist fantasies of Latinas as the more seductive “type of women.” Men just see a short or tight skirt along with a pair of high heels and nice blouse that exposes some skin and instinctively they begin the catcalls. It is more common for them to mumble disrespectful words to a Latina than it is to other women because they perceive Latinas as sexual eye candy for their male gaze. Without any regards of her being, she is now being harassed by men who suddenly feel entitled to do so. Men see a woman with confidence and right away they want to take that away from her. Their minds have been morally and socially conditioned to perceive females this way.

Social media along with newspapers, politics, religion, and photography have all created a fictional and stereotypical image of the Latin woman in society. Many believe that if not all most women are named Maria. Maria is a name that originally came from the Virgin Mary. Mexican women idolize the Virgin Mary and in their devotion to her they name their daughters after her as a symbol of solidarity and to keep her image alive. The media does not portray this or says that society needs to be respectful to this part of our culture. Media then shows us that “Maria” belongs in the labor field where she is

not even allowed to ask for minimum wage because she is a woman of color coming from a different country which places her on last tier of the social pyramid. Maria needs to simply have to conform herself to the few cents she earns. Due to the fact that most Latin women unfortunately do not dominate the English language they are not able to achieve a better job. Others feel superior to them because English is not their first language and most of the time they have an accent and way of speaking “ too fast” that most people do not like. It is hard for Latinas to achieve higher education because common society and its portrayals of Latin women believe that we do not belong in higher education.

The Marias must be silent working graveyard shifts while the Bettys sit in their own offices. A woman who is not a woman of color is less likely to put up with this insult because she holds a higher social stance. Most non-women of color are expected to go to good schools to receive an excellent education and have their parents buy them cars on their sixteenth birthdays, and are shown what a luxurious world they are part of, and the distinction between rich and poor is made right away because our parents did not have the opportunity to achieve higher education we are considered the last tier in the social pyramid. Many Latinos grow up in the housing projects or living in small crowded spaces that hardly have any space for them to focus. At a young age they are sent to get a job. They may also become the parent of their younger siblings because they have to help out their mother. These are all obstacles that the Latino/a community is forced to endure and keeps them from continuing a higher education and forcing them to keep working minimal jobs. Society places these minorities in a state of silence treating them as children who need to be obedient in order to live.

Most, if not all, Latin women experience societal pressures from every angle imaginable: from our own cultures, to western patriarchal views of women of color, and from men on the street. These men who are socially conditioned by society try to intimidate these women by oppressing them in every form possible. Societal policing will continue to infiltrate their lives and communities should not continue to condone that. It is inhumane to spend our lives placing people into atrocious categorizations because making these distinctions lead to never-ending oppression. How can one expect to become a “successful community” when we can not view others with equality?

Although there are efforts to creating a righteous community, Latinas as well as other minorities need to dismantle the oppressive barriers keeping them from achieving a healthy and just lifestyle, to be able to consider their communities as moving forward to becoming progressive. Society may move forward and become more accepting of different sexual groups or empower women in ways they did not before, but that is not enough. Our society was founded on morals, including boundaries, that these Latinas are not supposed to cross. They must continue fighting to be considered as competent human beings in their societies. Society may want them at the bottom but we know that that is not where they belong. Women know their own self worth and that they are more than what society has made the ideal woman to be.