



Centring Latinidad in Sustainability

Building Latine Cultural Fluency in the Sustainability Sector

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Publish date: October 2023

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About the cover: Corn has been a food staple and a cultural symbol throughout Latin America for millennia. The varieties of maize across the region are as diverse as its people. We also highlight try to signify the connection between the Latine community and the Earth.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Hispanic Access Foundation for co-hosting and providing funding for this dialogue, as well as the contributions from the team, Shley Suarez-Burgos and Shanna Edberg, in reviewing this document.

We thank Valentina Medina for the artwork on the cover and within the report.

Thank you to Roxy Shapwaykeesic for designing the report. The portraits of people in vignettes were provided courtesy of each respondent.

Thank you to all our distribution partners for the Inclusion Blueprint Dialogues, which are listed [here](#).

We especially want to thank interviewees for the research and participants in the Inclusion Blueprint Dialogue, including:

Francisco Alvarez-Higareda	Miguel Maldonado
Christina Armstrong	Selena Martinez-Mak
Carmen Ayala	Ross Estela Mendoza
John Carballo	Mario Mireles
Shanna Edberg	Nathaly Moreno
Daniel Fuentes	Juliana Ojeda
Cristina Garcia	Monica Ospina
Elizabeth Gonzalez	Mariana Palacios
Nayelli Gonzalez	Daphany Sanchez
Glenelys Jimenez	Shley Suarez-Burgos
Noemí Jimenez	Fabiola Torres
Carmen Lopez	Ilse Villacorta-Alatriste
Cynthia Lucar Diaz	

Thank you to Vicky Elliott and BuzzWord Inc. for their support in proofreading.

Executive Summary

After publishing *The State of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Sustainability Survey* in 2021, Diversity in Sustainability (DiS) has continued its sector-wide research through the Inclusion Blueprint Dialogues into how to make sustainability more inclusive and accessible.

Our first dialogue, which focused on the Latine community, *Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers – Latine* edition, was hosted with the Hispanic Access Foundation on July 21, 2023. We supplemented our research with a literature review of pre-existing research on the Latine community in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., and 10 interviews with Latine sustainability practitioners' on their experiences in higher education, the workplace, and their interactions with sustainability. The goal was to build cultural fluency for Latine culture within sustainability.

First, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of the Latine community, given that it can be hard to identify experiences that are common to all. What we have found in our research, however, is that members of the Latine community do share cultural attributes that resonate deeply with the concept of sustainability, including strong kinship and community bonds, an emphasis on relationships, self-reliance, and resilience, and a deep connection with the land. The

Latine community has historically played a decisive role in shaping labour and resistance movements, particularly in the United States. In addition, many Latine populations are exposed to a disproportionate number of social and environmental hazards, living and working in areas affected by air pollution, energy insecurity, and vulnerability to fire, heat, and natural disasters, particularly in the face of climate change. Lastly, people who have been deprived of access to nature have been robbed of their connection to the land. As a consequence, the Latine community has a deep understanding of the effects of social and environmental injustice.

Yet, despite these valuable experiences, members of the community continue to face major barriers in entering the sustainability sector and pursuing successful careers. The hurdles to overcome include the high cost of education, a lack of networks and mentors that can help them navigate a path through higher education and into the working world, and persistent discrimination. We feel it is vital for members of the Latine community to take part in Latine-specific networks and to find mentors both in these communities and externally, to lean into their many skills and experiences, to practice networking, and also to find mentors outside the community.

We believe that the sustainability sector needs to do more to support the Latine community – and that we are doing a disservice to everyone by undervaluing the rich experience the community, and other BIPOC communities, bring to the table. Some potential solutions could include offering scholarships to Latine students, focusing on more inclusive hiring practices (including reducing overspecialization, establishing blind hiring, and paying a living wage), building cultural fluency, support for networking skills, and providing clearer pathways for finding a role in the sustainability sector.

Methodology

This document is based on a literature review of pre-existing research, interviews with 10 Latine sustainability professionals in the summer of 2023, and the findings of the Inclusion Blueprint Dialogue *Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers – Latine* edition, held on July 21, 2023. All references are included as endnotes in this document. This pre-read is designed to give historical, political, and socioeconomic context on the Latine community in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.; the challenges faced by members of the Latine community working in the sector and their unique relationship to the concept of sustainability; and actions that can substantively support the Latine community in cultivating a sense of belonging in the sustainability sector, in a way that preserves and embraces Latine culture and identity.

Limitations

Although it is united by the Spanish language, and by shared family values, traditions, and culture, the Latine community is unusually diverse, representing numerous countries, backgrounds, and experiences. Not all elements of Latine culture apply equally to every Latine person.

This report will focus mostly on the Latine population in the United States, keeping in mind that other realities exist in the U.K. and Canada, and other variables such as education, gender, class, and acculturation affect everyone's experience.

While we have tried our best to capture the nuances we have learned from interviewees and from external research, we are mindful of the fact that the authors of this research are not of Latine descent and lack its lived experience. We humbly invite you to send any corrections or suggestions for this document to info@diversityinsustainability.com.

A note on terms used in this report

We have chosen the term “Latine” as an overarching phrase to describe the community, as an easily pronounced gender-neutral alternative to Latina or Latino. However, within this pre-read, you will note that Hispanic, Latino/a, Latine, Latinx, and Latin American are used fluidly based on the origin of the research we are referring to. For reference, we include our understanding of the definitions of each term below:

- **Hispanic** – a Spanish-speaking person living in the U.S., including those from Spain or from Latin America but excluding citizens of Brazil.
- **Latina** – a woman or girl of Latin American origin or descent, particularly in the U.S.
- **Latino** – a man or boy of Latin American origin or descent, particularly in the U.S.
- **Latine** – a gender-neutral alternative to Latina or Latino. Used in preference to Latinx, because it is easier to pronounce for Spanish speakers. Used in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.

- **Latinx** – a gender-neutral description popular within the community.
- **Latin American** – people of Latin American descent, a term most commonly used in the U.K. and Canada.

About the Inclusion Blueprint Dialogues Series

The Inclusion Blueprint Dialogues are a follow-up to the *State of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Sustainability Survey*, which explored the demographics, barriers to entry and advancement, and individual experiences of those within the sector, as well as the organizational support on equity, diversity, and inclusion for sustainability practitioners. The survey highlighted the inherent privilege in the sector – high levels of social mobility and education, and the highly diverse young cohort of sustainability practitioners moving into the sector. The Inclusion Blueprint Dialogues pick up where the survey left off and focuses on assessing the life cycle of sustainability professionals, from youth to senior leadership, examining key influences, and factors that inhibit and facilitate entry into the field and advancement within it. A pre-read is developed for each dialogue, and after the dialogue is held, Diversity in Sustainability has been creating a suite of insights, tools, and resources to drive change and build capacity for inclusion in the wider sustainability sector, including stakeholder-specific pledges and longer-term working groups.

Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers is a multi-part dialogue that examines different racial/ethnic identities, how societal stereotypes have led to assumptions about specific communities, and how they affect the way members of those communities show up and advance in the workplace. We also want to examine how the richness of specific cultures and diasporic identities – many of which are strongly rooted in sustainability – shape our collective approaches to sustainability in our conversations and workplaces.

“I want to share a reality that preserves culture, gives an identity as people, and makes the Latino population competitive and valued citizens – on our own terms.”

- Ernesto Nieto, National Hispanic Institute¹

The Latine Context, from Colonization to the Modern Day

To set the stage, we provide some social, political, and economic history of the Latine population in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., from several centuries ago to the present day. We look at several historical trends that have affected these communities, including i) Colonization, Imperialism, and Independence ii) Citizenship and Migration and iii) Fight for Rights.

i) Colonization, Imperialism, and Independence



Spanish Colonization and the Legacy of the *Casta* System (15th to 18th centuries)

Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors arrive in Latin America in the 15th century, colonizing the region, forcing Indigenous peoples to convert to Catholicism, spreading disease, taking control of the land, and exploiting the people and the region. They also introduce the *casta* system, which creates a social hierarchy, situating people of European descent at the top to maintain power and superiority, and those of Indigenous and African descent at the bottom. The *casta* system makes assumptions about the character and quality of people according to their birth, skin colour, race, and ethnic origin.² The concept affects numerous aspects of life, including culture, economics, taxation, and religion. As populations mix and some relocate to other regions over time, insidious beliefs persist in society, including the harmful concept of “*mejorando la raza*” or “improving the race,” which implies marrying and having children with a lighter-skinned person.³

The Haitian Revolution and Independence (1791-1804)

Originally colonized by the Spanish, the native Taíno and Ciboney people of the island of Hispaniola are enslaved. By the 16th century, the population is virtually eliminated through genocide. The French then take over, importing increasing numbers of African slaves in the late 17th century to their colony in the west, which they called Saint-Domingue. After centuries of deadly conditions, conflicts between Haitian slaves, colonists, British and French colonizers erupt. In 1804, the Haitian people win independence from France, establishing the first nation to be founded by former slaves.⁴

The Battle of the Alamo and Mexican American War (1836-1848)

A Spanish priest, Father Antonio Olivares, founds the first mission in San Antonio, Texas, in order to convert Native Americans to Christianity. The mission is later known as the Alamo, and in 1826, Mexican soldiers storm the mission and kill Texan settlers. The Mexican-American war takes place a decade later, following border disputes between the two countries, moving a large population into the hands of the United States.

Spanish-American Wars (1808 to 1898) and Cuban Independence

With the backdrop of the Spanish-American wars of independence, Cuba gains independence and becomes a U.S. protectorate from 1898 to 1902. The U.S. gains economic and political dominance over the island.⁵

U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, Occupation of the Dominican Republic (1915-1934)

After a period of instability in Haiti, the U.S. forcefully intervenes to control Haiti, to secure a “U.S. defensive and economic stake in the West Indies.” President Woodrow Wilson sends 330 U.S. Marines to occupy Port-au-Prince in 1915, and rewrites the Haitian constitution two years later to guarantee American financial control.⁶ After centuries of conflict between the French, Spanish, and English, U.S. Marines occupy parts of the Dominican Republic, installing a military government. In 1922, the U.S. withdraws from the Dominican Republic.

The Cuban Revolution and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1959-1962)

In 1959, Fidel Castro and his forces overthrow the Fulgencio Batista regime in Cuba and establish a new Communist government. Land and private property are nationalized, including U.S. company properties.⁷ The U.S. imposes a trade embargo in 1960, cutting off diplomatic ties with Castro’s government.⁸ In 1961, using a brigade of Cuban exiles sponsored by the CIA, the U.S. attempts to overthrow Castro at the Bay of Pigs, but the mission fails. In 1962, a full embargo from the U.S. is imposed on Cuba. Cuba works with the Soviet Union to build nuclear missile bases on the island in secret, but they are discovered, and a tense 13-day standoff between the U.S. and the Soviet Union follows. Many Cubans leave for the U.S.

“I really struggle with the Latinx identity, because of the erasure of Blackness and indigeneity. We’re navigating these systems, and we definitely see, for example, that colourism is so strong in my family – and we can see the effects of what that looks like in our cultures and how that translates into the working world. I have such deep experience and deep visceral pain associated with colourism, I can see how it impacts the workplace and relationships. And I’m very sensitive to people who are struggling with a nuanced identity.”

- Participant, *Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers – Latine edition*

ii) Citizenship and Migration



Immigration after Mexico's Revolution: Puerto Ricans Are Granted Statutory U.S. Citizenship (1910-1917)

After the Mexican Revolution, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans fleeing the violence cross into the U.S. In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signs the *Jones-Shafroth Act*, granting statutory U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans to allow them to join the U.S. Army. The act establishes Puerto Rico's government with executive, judicial, and legislative branches, and endows Puerto Ricans with a Bill of Rights, an insular bicameral legislature with 19 elected Senate members, and 39 elected members of the House of Representatives. It also grants Puerto Rico's governor and the U.S. executive branch the authority to veto or override any law enacted by that legislature.⁹

Creation of the Border Patrol (1924)

The Border Patrol is established to prevent illegal entry to the United States, primarily along the Mexico-U.S. border.

The Bracero Program (1917-1921, 1942-1964)

The *Bracero program* is set up during World War I, and then again in World War II, to allow Mexican workers to enter the United States as temporary guest workers on U.S. farms. With the higher wages, the program set the stage for large-scale migration from Mexico to the U.S. when the guest worker program ended.¹⁰

Dominican Immigration (1960-1990s)

After the death of the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo and the ensuing political and economic upheaval, Dominicans immigrate to the U.S., mainly to New York and Florida, including many dissidents, university students, professors, and middle-class workers. Later waves of Dominican immigrants predominantly include women of low-income and working-class backgrounds.^{11,12}

Cuban American Adjustment Act (1966)

The U.S. Congress passes the Cuban American Adjustment Act, allowing Cubans who have lived in the U.S. for a year to become permanent residents.¹³

Haitians Immigrate to North America (1960s and 1970s)

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many Haitians immigrate to Canada (mainly via Montréal) and the U.S., to escape the dictatorships of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

Continued Latin American Wave of Immigration into Canada (1970s-1990s)

In the 1970s-1990s, a wave of Latin American immigrants arrives in Canada, from Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, and Guatemala, for better opportunities and to avoid political repression and civil war.



Cynthia Lucar Diaz

Cynthia Lucar Diaz is a first-generation Peruvian-Canadian. Her sustainability journey began with her first trip home,

after leaving Peru in the political instability surrounding the Sendero Luminoso uprising. It was an eye-opening experience, as she became aware of the persistent social, economic, and environmental disparities between communities in the global South and her new home, Canada. This awakened a passion in her to create participatory, impactful, equitable, and just change, as well as an interest in sustainability, public policy, and community development.

Cynthia has led and implemented multi-stakeholder initiatives in the non-profit, public, and private sectors to achieve social impact, better environmental outcomes, and inclusive policy change. She is the chair of the Ontario Food Collaborative, an organization recognized by the G7 Alliance for Resource Efficiency as a best practice of a national cross-sector initiative. She has also been recognized for her contributions in waste reduction and the circular economy by Waste to Resource Ontario, and selected as a DiverseCity Fellow by CivicAction.

Third Wave of Cuban Immigration (1980s-1990s)

The Cuban government opens the port city of Mariel in 1980 to Cubans interested in leaving for the United States. The Cuban American community launches a flotilla of boats to move more than 125,000 Cubans to the U.S. These Cubans are less affluent than those who arrived in previous generations, and some were incarcerated while in Cuba, and as a result, face stigmatization in the U.S. In the 1980s and 1990s, tens of thousands of Cubans try to flee by sea to the U.S., many aboard precariously made vessels.¹⁴

NAFTA (1994)

In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement is concluded. In Mexico, this results in a drop in per capita growth to 1.2%, a decline in real wages, and increasing unemployment. Additionally, as heavily subsidized U.S. corn and other staples enter Mexico, small farmers suddenly find themselves unable to make a living, and 2 million are forced to leave their farms. Consumer food prices also rise, leaving a generation living in food poverty. Industrial corridors contaminate waterways, create solid waste and urban air pollution¹⁵, and sicken the population. Many Mexicans decide to immigrate to the U.S.¹⁶



Daniel Fuentes

Daniel Fuentes was born in Mexico, his childhood impacted by the 1994 financial crisis precipitated by NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. His family had been living a comfortable, middle-class life, but his mother became the single household provider for four children, taking an agricultural job as a so-called “illegal” immigrant in the U.S. This experience excited Daniel’s interest in the significance of economic relationships, and he translated this into an interest in business, sustainability, and development finance.

He has originated and built multi-million-dollar partnerships and blended finance initiatives for economic development in emerging and frontier markets, in collaboration with bilateral agencies, multilaterals, and development financial institutions.

He has also spearheaded the creation of a one-of-a-kind alternative financial mechanism in Canada to reverse the trend of habitat loss, work that has been recognized by the Nature Conservancy of Canada as “an excellent example of Canadian leadership in pay-for-success models.” He received recognition as a Climate Leader from Finance for the Future (offered by the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, Deloitte, and Accounting for Sustainability).

Immigration to Canada, U.K. (2000s+)

Mexicans, Colombians, Brazilians, Venezuelans, Ecuadorians, and Argentinians immigrate to Canada and the U.K., creating new communities. Many of these immigrants are highly educated.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (2012-present)

An administrative relief program is created in the U.S. to protect eligible immigrants who arrived in the country as children from being deported, giving them protection and a work permit.¹⁷ It requires that Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status and the work permit be renewed every two years. Many recipients are from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala.¹⁸

iii) Fight for Rights



Zoot Suit Riots (1943)

Following the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial in Commerce, California, where José Gallardo Díaz is found unconscious and dying near a reservoir with two stab wounds and a broken finger, young U.S. servicemen and white Angelenos attack and strip Mexican-American, African-American, and Filipino-American children, teenagers, and youths for wearing “unpatriotic” zoot suits. Race riots spread across the U.S. ¹⁹

Mendez v. Westminster School District case (1947)

In 1947, a landmark ruling from the *Mendez vs. Westminster School District* case prohibits segregation in California public schools and aims to level the educational playing field for Mexican children. This case sets a precedent for the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case seven years later.

Hernandez v. State of Texas – civil rights case of Pete Hernandez (1954)²⁰

The *Hernandez v. Texas* case rules that the conviction of an agricultural labourer, Pete Hernandez, for murder, should be overturned, since Mexican-Americans are barred from participating in both the jury that indicted and convicted him. This leads to identifying that the systematic exclusion of Mexican-Americans from jury service is unconstitutional.

"Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore."

- César Chávez

Civil Rights Act (1964)

Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, discrimination is outlawed based on race, sex, religion, colour, or national origin. Racial segregation is ended.

Delano Grape Strike and Formation of the National Farm Workers Association (1965)

César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, of the Community Service Organization, form the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) to agitate for higher wages and to support rising rents in migrant camps.²¹ Along with

Filipino workers led by Larry Itliong, Philip Vera Cruz, Benjamin Gines, Pete Elasco, and Lupe Martinez of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) stage strikes, protests, and consumer boycotts of the grape industry in order to improve working conditions for farm workers. The NFWA and AWOC then merge into the United Farm Workers. In 1972, Dolores Huerta formulates the slogan "*Sí, se puede*" ("Yes, we can" or "Yes, it is possible") for the United Farm Workers, and it has since been used as a rallying cry by other labour unions and civil rights organizations and also by Barack Obama when he was campaigning for president.

Chicana/Latina Women Rise (1980s)

As part of the original Chicano movement, the contributions of Chicana/Latina women were not acknowledged. To amplify their voice, create community, extend knowledge to other women and change perceptions, a group of Chicana/Latina academic women gather at the University of California and create the *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* to articulate Chicana/Latina feminist perspectives.

The historical events listed in this preceding section are by no means exhaustive, but seek to provide the historical groundwork for the socio-political situation that shape the worldview of Latine sustainability practitioners.

Latine populations today in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.

Despite their shared heritage, there are major differences between the Latine populations in the U.S., Canada, and U.K. In the U.S., the Latine population has a longer history, while in Canada

and the U.K., most Latin Americans are recent immigrants who arrived in the late 20th century or even more recently. The chart below provides more detail on the percentage of the population,

countries of origin, and predominant sectors of employment for the Latine population for the major countries that DiS serves.

	Percentage of population	Countries of origin	Predominant sectors of employment
U.S.	19%	Mexico, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras	Hispanic workers are concentrated in jobs involving manual labour, including farming, fishing, forestry, building, grounds cleaning and maintenance, food preparation and service, construction, extraction, transportation, and material handling. Latinos make up 80% of farm workers, but are rapidly gaining ground in management positions. ²²
Canada	2%	Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela	The earliest Latin Americans to arrive in the late 20th century tended to work in lower-income jobs, in the service sector, light industry, and manufacturing. More recent immigrants, in line with immigration policy, have higher levels of education and work in better-paid jobs, including insurance, real estate, travel, and restaurant industries. ²³
U.K.	<1%	Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico	Most of the population arrived in the U.K. in 2000, about half of them with a university education. Forty-five percent are in low-paid work, including cleaners, kitchen assistants, porters, waiting staff, security guards, caring, sales, and processing. ²⁴



John Carballo

John Carballo was born in Virginia to parents from Ecuador and Bolivia who came to the U.S. in their early 20s in search of a better life and to support their families back at home. Growing up, John did well in school and found his career interest when he took his first environmental science course in high school. That led him on a journey through environmental education, working on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., and now as a sustainability consultant helping to develop greenhouse gas inventories for a variety of clients.

He looked for a job in sustainability right out of college, but struggled to find resources, not knowing where to turn for guidance. Now, he gets involved as often as possible to help students and recent grads break into the sustainability field. John was the director of student affairs for the Association of Latino Professionals for America (ALPFA)'s D.C. chapter, has been a mentor with Latinxs in Sustainability, and recently partnered with Voiz Academy as a panelist to discuss his career and answer students' questions.

Defining Latinidad: A Shared Cultural Experience

Latinidad is a term used to describe the shared cultural practices of pan-Latino communities.²⁵ While some consider the concept overly simplistic, since it is heavily place-based, some common threads have emerged from our research on Latine cultures:

- **Familismo** – dedication, commitment, and loyalty to family, seeking the family's advice for important decisions, with families assuming responsibility for the care of other family members. This also shows up as selflessly putting family members' needs above one's own and as a strong emphasis on collectivism.²⁶

"Many of us grow up really valuing or prioritizing community or family, rather than just our nuclear groups or ourselves. I think we inherently understand valuing group well-being or compromising individuality."

- Participant, *Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers – Latine edition*

- **Machismo and marianismo** – while these roles are changing, given the upward mobility of Latinas, traditional *machismo* looks to men as providers, dominant players who maintain the integrity of the family unit and uphold

its honor. *Marianismo* reflects women's role as guardians of the home, dedicated, loving, supportive, responsible for passing on cultural and religious values, and for helping those who need assistance, both in the family and the community.²⁷

- **Self-determination and independence** – many Latine communities demonstrate a strong sense of independence and self-determination. Not wanting to be a burden to others, they choose to solve any problems that arise either on their own or within their community.²⁸

"When I started in the field, I wasn't confident to ask for recommendation letters. I had a fear of failing other people. I think this is a mindset that we have as Latinos. We want to do it all ourselves, instead of relying on others."

- Peruvian social impact practitioner

- **Flexibility and bilingualism** – many in the Latine community grow up in a bilingual environment, speaking both English and Spanish.

“Since we grew up in bilingual ecosystems, even if we might have limited Spanish fluency, we all understand on the gut level that there isn’t a single ‘correct’ way to communicate.”

- Participant, Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers – Latine edition

- **Living in harmony with the land** – culturally speaking, many Latine cultures have a history deeply rooted in the land, and Latine cultural heritage also emphasizes a strong bond with nature and conservation.²⁹ Several dialogue respondents said that they had grown up with an attitude of making do or innovating with scarce resources.

Some Latine cultures also emphasize the following attributes:

- **Respeto (respect)** – a focus on respect and hierarchy in social relationships, obedience to authority, deference, decorum, and public behaviour.³⁰

- **Personalismo** – establishing good rapport and relationships, and unconditionally acknowledging the essential value of each individual, rather than their social status or professional accomplishments.³¹

- **Simpatía** – the tendency to prefer and create social interactions of warmth and emotional positivity while avoiding conflict and/or overt negativity.³²

“Relationship-building is not a value in our profit-driven, mechanized, corporate culture.”

- Participant, Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers – Latine edition

“I think in the past, I ran away from difficult discussions on advancement. I felt like I’ve tried to get a promotion and after meeting and talking about the target and not getting anywhere, I felt I had no choice but to leave. I have historically not been comfortable having difficult conversations, and maybe it’s a cultural thing, or a family thing, where we’re uncomfortable talking about things that are uncomfortable. One of my goals now is to help young people navigate these types of events with more emotional intelligence.”

- Participant, Unpacking Stereotypes and Cultural Barriers – Latine edition

Many of these cultural attributes – strong family and community bonds, warm relationships, being self-reliant, making do with scarce resources and living in harmony with the land – have an inherently strong connection to living sustainably.



Glenelys Jimenez

Born and raised in New York City, Glenelys is a mother, a first-generation Dominican-American, and the first member of

her family to earn a master’s degree. She has a strong connection to her culture, which emphasizes resourcefulness and valuing natural resources. Her grandmother and mother immigrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic, and worked in the garment industry when they first arrived in New York City. Her family’s experience inspired her to write about the plight of garment workers for her master’s thesis.

Glenelys is making a career transition into sustainability, and she is acutely aware of the norms in corporate workplaces. She is excited to lend a voice to practices that will turn the tide. She is also an entrepreneur, starting a community for young people to gain practical skills to thrive as adults. The topics it focuses on will range from financial wellness, mental and sexual health, and career preparedness — all from an inclusive perspective.



Noemí Jimenez

Noemí is a self-professed “third-culture kid,” born in San Francisco to Cuban and Ecuadorian immigrants, growing up in Quito and now based in Austin, Texas.

After she was laid off from a role at a boutique sustainability communications firm, she decided to start a company, qb., with a former colleague at Change.org, Sam Hartsock. The pair set out to create a work experience vastly different from what they had encountered in their careers. qb. consulting is made up of a remote-first workforce, with a culture that puts life first and work second, and a team that prides itself on its diversity. qb. is women-owned and led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and has built a track record helping Fortune 500 companies on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) and sustainability strategy and governance, reporting and communications, and climate resilience.

Noemí is also a mother of two, a travel fanatic, and a student of sign language.



Nayelli Gonzalez

Nayelli is the proud child of Mexican immigrants and was the first in her family to go to college. She is the founder and

CEO of CreatorsCircle, a resource hub that connects diverse youth with opportunities to create a life of purpose and impact. In previous roles, Nayelli led global teams and advised start-ups, nonprofits, small businesses, and Fortune 100 companies on sustainability innovation strategies that ignite collaboration, build capacity, and drive stakeholder engagement and activation. A trained journalist with an MBA, Nayelli has also written about sustainable business and social impact trends for a variety of publications for the past 15 years. She is an avid lifelong learner, with certificates from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and degrees from Boston University, the University of California-Berkeley, Stanford University, and the Presidio Graduate School. She’s a systems thinker who loves to learn, share knowledge, and help others connect the dots. Nayelli is also a mom, a breast cancer survivor, and a student of mindfulness meditation.

Barriers Faced by Latines

When we look at the barriers to advancement for Latines, there are several areas that we should consider, including during core schooling years, finding work, and accelerating to senior levels within organizations.

Barriers During Core Schooling Years

Sustainability is a field defined by a high level of education – 62% of practitioners have a master’s degree and 90% at least a bachelor’s degree, according to our *State of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sustainability Survey*. In the U.S., only 11% of Americans who identify as Latino have a bachelor’s degree, compared to 24% of white Americans, but this rate is increasing quickly. In our survey, we also found that Latine practitioners experienced the greatest financial difficulty upon entering the sustainability sector, given the high cost of education. In addition, Latine students face many challenges in their core school years:

- **Latines as first-generation students:** Latines are most likely to be the first in their families to attend university, at 44%, compared to African American (34%), all (20%), Asian (29%) and white (22%) students. Typically, first-generation students of all backgrounds face barriers including a lack of self-esteem, adjustment to college, and family support navigating the university environment.³³ Within our dialogue, 67% of the participants were the first person in their family to go to college or university.

“If you’re the first generation to go to college, you don’t have the networks to get ahead, as the higher socioeconomic classes do. And when we do make it, we’re so few and far between, we can’t take everyone along.”

- Dominican-American sustainability practitioner

- **Working full-time as a student:** Most Latine students in the U.S. work more than 30 hours a week, and in some cases overtime, to finance their education, given the significant expense required. Thirty-two percent of students work 40 hours or more, 19% work 30 to 39 hours and 26% work 20 to 29 hours a week. This limits their ability to study and to participate in extracurricular activities.³⁴
- **Living off campus:** 81% of Latine students live off campus or with their parents, more than those of other racial/ethnic groups, which leaves them less time on campus to build new connections and networks for their future endeavours.
- **Latina students caring for dependents:** 32% of Latina female students are caring for dependents as undergraduates, which reduces the amount of time they can spend studying, participating in extracurricular activities, or creating networks.



Monica Ospina

Growing up in a small town in Colombia, Monica Ospina immersed herself in nature with her family, surrounded by diverse wildlife, swimming in the local river, and eating fresh fruit. At a young age, she moved with her mother and sister to Miami, a concrete jungle without family or community. As a first-generation college student in the U.S., Monica worked full-time while pursuing both of her bachelor’s degrees, and started her career in sustainability through Americorps.

“I wouldn’t even have known what burnout was back then,” she says. “There was no backup – either you succeed or you succeed.”

Monica’s passion for nature and sustainability is driven by her childhood experiences and her strong belief that humans need to be connected with the Earth. After a great deal of hard work and the mentorship of several strong women managers, Monica is now working as a sustainability manager in the Broward County government in Florida and pursuing a master’s in sustainability part-time.

Barriers in the Workplace

Latine employees encounter a number of barriers within the workplace.

- **Discrimination in the workplace – racism and colourism:** According to the IBM Value Institute, 87% of Hispanics say they have experienced prejudice because of their race and 70% of junior leaders say they have to work harder to succeed because of their identity³⁵ – regardless of their seniority. Sixty-three percent of all Hispanics say that they continue to work harder because of their identity. According to LinkedIn, 73% of Latinos of ages 18-34 believe that a person's skin tone impacts their career progression, and 65% of Latinos with darker skin complexions feel that they have been overlooked for career advancement³⁶.

"My sister and I have both followed a path into social impact. I think she is more accomplished than I am: she has a PhD. Yet, our experiences have been so different – she is a Salvadorean woman who has a darker complexion than I do. At airports, literally when we've been on the same trip – she's been harassed. She also feels like she often has to explain herself and prove her intellect, despite the fact that she is well-educated."

- Salvadorean-Canadian sustainability practitioner

- **Cannot be themselves in the workplace:** A study published by the Center for Talent Innovation found that 76% of Latinos repress parts of their personas at work, including appearance, body language, and communication style, all in an effort to display "executive presence." A LinkedIn study found that of Latino professionals with strong accents, 89% felt overlooked for career advancement.³⁷ Disturbingly, Latinos who modify their personas and expend a great deal of energy repressing themselves are more likely to say that they are being promoted quickly.³⁸ In our dialogue, some participants stated that they were perceived as "too loud" or "too boisterous."

"In my late thirties, when I entered the corporate environment, I had straight hair, did my makeup all the time, and tried to present 'professionally.' As a woman, you want to make sure you're well dressed, because it gives you higher privilege and better access to things. As years went on, I realized that it was more draining to keep up this appearance. You already have me working here, and having that second layer of keeping up appearances was pointless. As I got into my thirties and learned more about myself— what I wanted out of my career — I became more and more myself."

- Dominican-American sustainability practitioner

- **Lacking networks and networking skills:** While relationship-building is at the centre of many Latine communities, networking in a business or organizational context can be a foreign concept to Latine employees, who may not have grown up with generational wealth or familiarity with navigating systemic cultural issues. Some of the participants in our dialogue also mentioned the difficulty of accessing Latine networks in the sustainability community, and some have found that they have not found a sense of solidarity with the broader Latine community.

"I'm not sure if there is a sense of overarching Latin pride. Some don't want to be associated with the Latinx community. For example, some might be lighter-skinned as an American, and dissociate themselves with the wider Latinx community. You'll see Hispanics who are all for deportation of migrants. They completely turn their back on their communities. It's a small group, and it's not the majority — but it exists."

- Cuban-American sustainability practitioner

- Lack of levers for advancement:

- **Lack of mentorship:** Latine mentors can be hard to find and are in high demand. A study from LinkedIn reported that 60% of Latino professionals would prefer a mentor who looked like them. Among our dialogue participants, 75% of participants did not have a Latine mentor/role model who could help them in the sector of sustainability.

“The few that I had identified as potential mentors who were Latinx refused to even engage in that type of relationship. And that was really disheartening. They would most likely understand what I’m going through or what my journey has been. And that was a door that closed very quickly, and they’ve just kind of backed away. We’re still in the same circles, but just don’t engage anymore, after having that kind of discussion around mentorship, which has really forced me to look elsewhere.”

- Peruvian-Canadian sustainability practitioner

“I haven’t found someone to help me progress. I’m not sure if it’s just a me problem or a system-wide problem, but I do think that it’s difficult to find mentors – actual mentors – within the space, because it is so niche. It’s new, it’s developing, it’s not like law or medicine, that’s been around forever. It’s hard to find genuine connection – you look at a list of the top 50 sustainability professionals, and the top are just white women. While we can relate as women, there are certain things that are harder to relate from a sponsorship or mentorship perspective that is not just transactional, hard or forced.”

- Dominican-American sustainability practitioner

- **Under-representation at senior levels:** In the U.S., Latine CEOs lead only 20 of the Fortune 500 companies and hold only 4% of board seats.³⁹ In the *State of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sustainability Survey* conducted by Diversity in Sustainability, we found that Hispanic/Latine practitioners were underrepresented at senior levels of sustainability organizations.

- **Lack of sponsorship for advancement:** Latine professionals without sponsors are

less likely to ask for stretch assignments or raises, or to be satisfied with their rates of advancement. Latine professionals with sponsors (senior-level advocates) are 42% more likely to be satisfied with their career progression than those without sponsors, and only 5% of full-time, high-earning Latine employees in large companies have sponsors, compared to 13% of their white counterparts. The cultural values of respect for hierarchy and authority make it less comfortable for Latines to approach senior people who might be sponsors.⁴⁰ Lastly, it was noted that Latinas are three times more likely to have sponsorship than Latino men, and U.S.-born Latines are six times as likely as Latines born elsewhere to have sponsors.

“The idea of mentorship is relatively new to me. It’s not something that I was used to. It was always difficult to ask for help. I think relationships with different individuals have helped me to understand my challenges and opportunities from a wider perspective. They are relationships which help you to understand problems from a different angle and allow you to come up with the solution by yourself rather than tell you what to do. I found that these are incredibly important for my professional development.”

- Mexican-Canadian sustainability practitioner

- **Pay disparities for Latinas:** According to Lean In, it takes Latina women 23 months to achieve the annual earnings of white men, and Latinas are paid 46% less than white men and 31% less than white women.⁴¹ In our dialogue, several participants also mentioned that they were expected to take low-wage entry jobs that make it necessary to work two jobs, or to accept lower pay on the grounds that they were “passionate about the role.”

- **Burden of DEI for Latine community:**

Participants in our dialogue discussed how the onus of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives often falls on their shoulders or shows up in exploitative ways. For example, one young respondent mentioned that in order to be considered for a role, she felt she had to share personal and somewhat traumatic details about her life experience or identity to secure the job. Another participant mentioned that she faces “magical brown woman syndrome” – facing disproportionate expectations in relation to the resources she was given. Another respondent noted that it can be hard to see DEI initiatives in action, which can seem overly performative if you are the only minority in the room.

Unique social and environmental challenges facing the Latine community

The Hispanic Access Foundation wrote the Environmental Policy Toolkit 2023⁴², which provides a substantial statistics base on the Latine population, their interest in sustainability issues and the level at which they are affected by social and environmental injustice. Interest is

high in sustainability issues, with the community drawing connections between the health of the Earth and the health of the community. A selection of statistics from the Toolkit are included on this and subsequent pages.

2/3

of Latinos say they have personally felt the impact of climate change.⁴³ They tend to live in the three U.S. states experiencing the most serious effects of climate change, including California, Texas, and Florida.⁴⁴

89%

of U.S. Latinos said that they believe in protecting the environment as a way of protecting their communities.⁴⁵

96%

of U.S. Latinos say environmental issues like pollution and global warming are personally important to them.⁴⁶

71%

of Latinos say climate change is affecting their local community.⁴⁷

83%

of Latino voters support gradually transitioning to 100% of energy being produced from clean, renewable sources like solar and wind over the next 10 to 15 years.⁴⁸

82%

of Latino voters see climate change as a threat to water supply – more than any other demographic group.⁴⁹



Daphany Sanchez

Daphany Rose Sanchez is a New York City native who has dedicated herself to working as an energy equity advocate for

15 years. She is a third-generation resident of public housing, at the New York City Housing Authority, and is passionate about ensuring that all New Yorkers preserve their homes through energy democracy. In 2017, Daphany founded Kinetic Communities, a New York Minority & Women Benefit Corporation, which works at the crossroads of affordable housing and energy efficiency, serving low-to moderate-income New Yorkers through education, networking, and making opportunities easier to understand. Daphany has a B.Sc. from New York University's Tandon School of Engineering and an M.Sc. from the New School. She has been honoured as a Next City Vanguard Fellow, a NYC Housing Hero in 2018, was named a 2019 Grist 50 Fixer, 2020 NYC Climate Hero, and a 2020 GreenBiz 30 under 30, for her diligent work in ensuring that front-line communities and people of colour are engaged in a just clean energy transition.

The Latine population is also disproportionately affected by social and environmental injustice. Some examples include:

Over 40%

of Latino households in the U.S. are energy insecure – they cannot afford the energy required to heat and cool their homes, or refrigerate food and medicine.⁵⁰

Approximately 29%

of Latinos live within 3 miles of a Superfund site.⁵¹

Over 1.81 million

Latinos live within a half-mile of existing oil and gas facilities, and face an elevated risk of cancer due to toxic air emissions from oil and gas development. More than 1.78 million Latinos live in areas where toxic air pollution from oil and gas facilities is so high that the cancer risk from this industry alone exceeds the EPA's level of concern.⁵²

Nearly 10 million

Latinos in the U.S. live in counties that received failing grades for air pollution.⁵³

2X as likely

for Latino communities as for others in the U.S. to be affected by wildfires.⁵⁴

3X as likely

for Latinos as for others in the U.S. to die from heat exposure on the job than non-Latinos,⁵⁵ and Latinos are 43% more likely to live in areas that will see the greatest reduction in work hours due to extreme temperatures.⁵⁶

3X as likely

for Latinos as for white communities to live in an area designated as "nature deprived."⁵⁷

21% more likely

for Latinos than whites to live in urban heat islands or areas dominated by asphalt and concrete, where parks, shade-providing trees, and other vegetation are lacking.⁵⁸

The lowest rate of health insurance

in the U.S. is found among Latinos, restricting their ability to access care when afflicted by illnesses and injuries caused by climate impacts such as heat, smoke, or mold from flooding.⁵⁹

Climate change exacerbates the risk of mental health problems in Latinos, increasing their risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, attachment disorders, and substance use disorders.⁶⁰



Shley Suarez-Burgos

Shley Suarez Burgos was born and raised in Miami, Florida, of Caribbean parents. She discovered

her passion for conservation-focused digital storytelling after leaving Miami in her mid-20s.

Combining her background of professional salmon fishing, filmmaking, and yoga instruction, she has discovered outlets for creative eco-storytelling by creating authentic conversations and events for diverse communities. Shley also is a lobbyist and advocate for ocean and urban forestry issues affecting coastal communities. She is currently a member of the *Olas y Acción* Advisory Council, Latino Outdoors, NASA Diversity Board, Catalyst Miami's Medical Debt Advisory Board, and has been a Latino Conservation Week Ambassador for the last four years.

Supporting the Latine community

We believe that several interventions can be taken by the community and by the wider sector to support the Latine community in sustainability:

For the Latine community

- **Seek out other Latine networks focused on sustainability issues.** Externally, many groups are focused on cultivating connections, an interest in sustainability and advancement within the Latine community, including [GreenLatinos](#), [National Hispanic Environmental Council](#), [Hispanic Access Foundation](#), [Latinxs in Sustainability](#), [Latino Outdoors](#), [National Hispanic Institute](#) and [ESG Hispanic Network](#). *Latinxs in Sustainability* also offers mentorship programs. For larger organizations, Employee Resource Groups exist for the Latine community. This is a good way to build affinity in the community and seek advice at different levels of the organization. At *Diversity in Sustainability*, we are also building platforms to provide mentorships and networking opportunities.

- **Look for mentors outside the Latine community.** Although it is helpful to have a Latine mentor, don't be afraid to look for mentors in other communities as well.

- **Toot your horn and believe in your knowledge and skills.** Lean into your lived knowledge and everything you've accomplished personally and professionally. There is value in your experience!

"In my first professional engagement, my first boss, who was not a woman of colour, really trusted me and made sure I was included in different meetings and conversations. One day she took me in and said: 'I just need to tell you one thing. I need you to be more assertive with your achievements.' I feel uncomfortable when I'm praised. She said to me, 'In order to get a raise, you have to show what you've done.'"

- Colombian-American sustainability practitioner

"I was once told by someone, 'You've done a lot of work, and you don't talk about it. You should always apply to conferences as a speaker, even if it's a small session speaker, not a big one, because that way, you are doing two things at once. You're elevating yourself as a leader in the space, and also, you're gravitating folks to talk to you.' Since then, I've never gone to a conference that I'm not speaking at."

- Daphany Sanchez

- **Get practice networking.** Find a partner to help introduce you at networking events and continue to build your relationships to help you find other opportunities.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Look outside your normal communities for support and expand your experience beyond smaller groups.

For the sector

In the dialogue, participants identified a number of recommendations for the sector to take on in supporting the Latine community in sustainability.

- **For higher education, offer scholarships to first-generation students or those experiencing financial need in the Latine community who are pursuing a future in sustainability.** The price of education is a significant barrier for many, particularly in the U.S., where it often involves taking on significant debt.
- **For hiring organizations, focus on more inclusive hiring practices.** – Hiring organizations can reduce barriers to hiring by reducing overspecialized job and educational requirements, considering lived experience, correcting a bias toward prestigious schools, using blind hiring processes, and including more BIPOC people on interview panels. Lastly, paying at least a living wage is particularly important to attract talent, to ensure that your employees can focus on their role without worrying about having to make ends meet.

- **For the industry, build cultural fluency in the Latine community and its different groups.** While this report is a start in helping to build an understanding of Latine communities, continue cultivating relationships to establish proximity and familiarity and to tap into new ways of thinking.
- **For the industry, provide opportunities to network through icebreakers and mentorship opportunities.** Keep in mind that not everyone has had the chance to finesse their corporate networking skills. Helping to cultivate these skills and allowing for space to cultivate these skills provides a meaningful engagement opportunity for new talent.
- **For the industry, provide clearer pathways on how to find a role in sustainability.** Working on sustainability is not a linear process, but for communities who need assurance on a job after doing the work to get there, clear signposts help provide certainty.

The Latine community is grounded in sustainability, through its shared culture and lived experience, but the barriers its members face, in education and in the workplace, have limited their participation in the sustainability sector. This is a significant loss for the sector as a whole, which has much to learn from the richness of Latine history, identity, and culture.



Cristina Garcia

Cristina Garcia is a native New Yorker and first-generation Latina working at the intersection of clean energy and diversity. In

2017, she founded the group Latinxs in Sustainability (LiS), a collective dedicated to advancing the representation of Latinx professionals and communities in climate solutions. Through Latinxs in Sustainability, she has spearheaded an Inclusive mentorship program that intentionally matches professionals with similar lived experiences and offers a Professional Development Stipend to support Latinx professionals with economic barriers. Through LiS, she has also curated over 40 events focused on the Latinx experience in the sustainability industry and elevated the voices of over 50 Latinx professionals. She developed LiS' first-ever workforce development program with the City College of New York (CCNY), a Hispanic-serving Institution (HSI) where most students are the first in their families to attend college, to help connect students to industry. As a graduate of CCNY herself, Cristina has seen at first hand the underrepresentation of CCNY alumni in sustainability careers in New York City. That is why she is motivated to bring opportunities to students and the LiS member base who are seeking careers in sustainability.

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