



# CASE STUDY

# CASA JUANA COLÓN

OCTOBER 2024



## **About Fundación de Mujeres en Puerto Rico**

The Fundación de Mujeres en Puerto Rico (FMnPR), founded by women in the Diaspora and in Puerto Rico, promotes social justice and supports the economic security, safety, health, reproductive autonomy and general empowerment of women, girls and gender-fluid individuals in Puerto Rico.

We visualize an equitable Puerto Rico committed to social justice, where women, girls and gender fluid people are protagonists and can fully develop in freedom throughout their lives.



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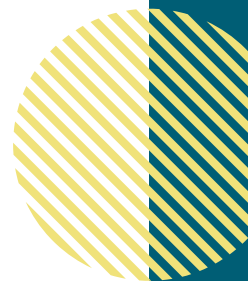
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## INTRODUCTION

Casa Juana Colón, founded in Comerío in 2004, has the mission of “offering spaces for comprehensive healing and transformation for women and their social environment,” with the vision that “women will be free, and committed to transforming their communities.” Casa Juana Colón defines itself as a community outreach organization founded on the values and principles of restorative justice, gender perspective, a comprehensive approach, and the protection of human rights (Casa Juana Colón Strategic Plan, 2023).

The organization provides free legal advice and representation as well as workshops on access to justice with a gender lens and a restorative justice perspective. Additionally, Casa Juana offers emotional support services to victims of gender-based violence and ensures their access to quality health services through their Community Health Services Coordinators.

This report presents the case study conducted at the request of the Fundación de Mujeres en Puerto Rico to assess the variables that have allowed Casa Juana Colón to provide services for 20 consecutive years without interruption. The findings of this study will help strengthen and replicate specific factors that have helped the organization achieve its goals and objectives, as well as systemize models and processes that can be emulated by other organizations that offer services to women from a gender lens.





## About the Researcher: Dra. Blanca Ortíz



Dr. Blanca Ortiz-Torres has a Ph.D. in Community Psychology from New York University and a Juris Doctor from the University of Puerto Rico. She has held several research and teaching positions in Puerto Rico and the United States. For twenty-five years she was a faculty member at the Psychology Department and the Institute for Psychological Research, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus (UPR). Dr. Ortiz-Torres was the Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies at the University of Puerto Rico.

Her research interests include decoloniality, gender, sexuality, community empowerment, the development of structural interventions to prevent HIV in various groups, public policy, and Cuban migration to Puerto Rico. She also does research and action work in areas such as community activation, citizen participation and development of community capital. She has offered courses as invited/visiting professor in Cuba, Uruguay, México, Ecuador, United States, Dominican Republic, and Perú. Dr. Ortiz-Torres has published numerous articles and book chapters and has been a member of the editorial boards of several journals, including the International Journal of Community Psychology, the Interamerican Journal of Psychology and the Revista Puertorriqueña de Psicología.

She is a former president of the Puerto Rican Psychological Association and a past Secretary General of the Interamerican Psychological Society. Dr. Ortiz-Torres has presented her work at more than 60 international conferences. She is a past president of the Puerto Rican Association of Psychology, a past General Secretary and past Treasurer of the Inter-American Society of Psychology. Dr. Ortiz-Torres has been a collaborator of Cumbre Ciudadana, the Community Foundation of Puerto Rico, the Citizen Agenda Project and was a member of the Technical and Professional Support Group for the Sustainable Development of Vieques.



# ABOUT CASA JUANA COLÓN

## Mission

To offer spaces for healing and comprehensive transformation for women and their social environment.

## Vision

Free women committed to transforming their environment.

Casa Juana Colón Apoyo y Orientación a la Mujer, Inc. (Casa Juana Colón) was founded in 2004 in the town of Comerío, Puerto Rico. The social and economic uncertainties that existed in Comerío at the time led the founding group to create a community-based organization that could support women heads of household to achieve access to essential services such as medical care, mental health, housing, education, among others.

Over the years, Casa Juana Colón began to look, from a gender perspective, at the barriers faced by women in Comerío, in the center region of the island, and in the whole country. This vision led us to work on urgent situations such as gender inequalities that foster gender violence, sexual violence and the lack of access to essential services, especially for women and children.

It is in the interest of gender equality and social justice for Casa Juana Colón to continue its efforts to accompany and advocate for women, especially survivors of gender-based violence, sexual violence, and stalking. Thus women can discover and develop their potential, transform and integrate the experiences that have formed the fabric of their history as a basis for action to initiate their personal and family transformation and that of their social environment.



## CASE STUDY

This research was conducted using the case study method. A case study is a qualitative research method that systematically studies processes and results, facilitating the assessment of variables that either help or prevent the achievement of established objectives and goals, in this case by an organization. A case study involves an in-depth analysis to gather information and understand the study phenomenon in a real-life context. The method provides a detailed, comprehensive look at a specific situation, which helps develop deductions, theories, and generalizations that may be applicable to other cases. Furthermore, case studies may inform public policymaking, guide organizational decision-making, and provide information on better practices in specific areas.

Multiple data sources are examined in a case study. Unlike other techniques, the unit analyzed in a case study is an organization (or individual), and self-comparisons are established through time. The study of the data obtained is conducted through content and/or thematic analysis in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the case.

**The following were the guiding questions of the study:**

1. Which factors have contributed to the results Casa Juana Colón has obtained?
2. What factors have constituted barriers to the organization's achievement of its goals and objectives?
3. Which administrative model has been adopted by the organization to conduct its operations? What changes has that model experienced through time, if any?
4. What elements constitute the organization's "community action model"?
5. What changes has the organization been required to make to ensure the sustainability of their programs?
6. What has the organization left unchanged to ensure the sustainability of their programs?



## METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier, a case study requires the use of several techniques to ensure an in-depth understanding of the study phenomenon. The present research was conducted using the data collection techniques described below:

1. **Document analysis:** Twenty-seven (27) digital and printed documents [1] generated by the organization at different moments of its history were reviewed to explore transformations with respect to mission, vision, goals and objectives, and scope of projects implemented. Most of the documents reviewed were printed and digital newspaper articles, information submitted as part of funding proposals, interviews with the Executive Director, and reports to funders. The Strategic Plan recently approved by the Board of Directors was also examined.
2. **Interviews:** I interviewed key organizational staff as well as participants and volunteers in Casa Juana Colón programs. Four (4) members of the work team, two (2) participants, three (3) members of the Board of Directors, and two (2) volunteers were interviewed, for a total of eleven (11) interviews. Ten of the study participants were women. Efforts were made to interview a male participant; however, we were unable to set up an appointment with him. The interview guide was based on the research questions, a visit/meeting at the Casa space to get to know the Director, and the preliminary findings from the document review stage. An interview guide was developed for members of the Board of Directors and staff and another for participants and volunteers. Most of the interviews (n=6) were conducted in person at Casa Juana, three (3) were done remotely and two (2) by phone.
3. **Results analysis:** The results of an evaluation conducted by a doctoral student from the University of Puerto Rico Medical Sciences Campus were reviewed, as well as reports generated by the organization through the years.

The data collected was triangulated, meaning that they were included in the analysis, in order to have a wide, comprehensive view of the various sources of information. The results are listed below.

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[1] Several project folders were examined, including a high volume of pages and documents; each folder was counted as one document.





## RESULTS

### *Two decades of work and history*

Casa Juana Colon's roots date back to 2002, when Ana Celia Cotto and María Teresa Vázquez (the latter deceased) felt a spiritual and emotional call to address the situation of women who were living in poverty in Comerío. Ana Celia is a nun affiliated with the Missionaries of Sisters of the Good Shepherd, and Teresa was a school counselor; they were friends, educators, and partners in the church. Ana Celia recalls:

***“At that time, we established that our focus should be on the transformation of women in order to transform the social fabric... We met all the time, gradually giving shape to the idea and reaching a consensus about working for women and with women, so that they would be the force, using their own hands and hearts, to generate that transformation. Like an instrument of change, of transformation, of social denunciation...”***

The two founders observed Comerío's reality for some time to determine the course the project should take. The next step was to invite a group of friends and colleagues, most of them educators, to consider joining the project. Once the group was formed, they thought that (as described by a Board member):

***“We needed an inspirational figure... so we set our eyes on Juana Colón... We saw the connection between the past and the present, an inspiration that summons us from the womanhood of this ancestral force, and established her as an inspirational model, validating her struggles and her transformative strength, and positioning ourselves, in solidarity, on the side of a woman who was rejected for being black, poor, illiterate, and a curandera (healer).”***

The members of the Board were in full agreement, and the project was named Casa Juana Colón.



In 2004, the group created a nonprofit corporation and began to offer its services in a small space located on Georgetti Street in Comerío, a property provided by a member of the group. At that time, the founding Board received its first donation—\$5,000 from Casa Comerío in Bayamón; “With \$5,000 we felt rich” said one of the Board Members. Their first organized activity was a floral workshop with two main objectives: offering participants “an experience of self-knowledge and healing, and providing the skills that would qualify them for a job.” In 2010, Cotto and Vázquez invited Janice Soliván, the current Executive Director, to be a part of the Board. A group of volunteers gradually joined, many of whom were involved with Casa for several years.

As described by a Board Member, in 2010, “the discussion on gender perspective and feminism began to develop at Casa Juana.” As the Comerío communities began to hear about Casa Juana, they went to request services, especially services related to gender violence. In 2015, the current Executive Director began to form collaborative ties with like-minded organizations, including Coordinadora Paz para la Mujer (CPM), Proyecto Matria, Casa Pensamiento de Mujer, and others with whom they joined resources to offer participant workshops and guidance. Soliván became President of the Board the following year (2016). Self-management projects for women then began to develop with different offerings, such as cooking, jewelry making, and woodcarving courses as well as home vegetable garden workshops. In 2010, other community impact projects began, such as a Literary Contest, Loas a Juana Colón, and a series of talks on gender issues. After fourteen years of hard work, they were seeing a significant increase in referrals of women for a wide range of services.

**During those first fourteen years after the organization was founded, all the work was done by the members of the Board of Directors and a group of volunteers.**

A change in course occurred in 2017 because of several extraordinary events. In 2016, Casa Juana helped develop an education curriculum with a gender equality lens for the Puerto Rico Department of the Family and received its first external funding from the CPM to offer workshops in Comerío and Cayey. In the aftermath of Hurricane María in September 2017, “Casa became a distribution center. We worked tirelessly for 8 months, seven days a week.” said Janice Soliván.



For Ana Celia, Hurricanes Irma and María marked a turning point:

***“... the boom produced by the hurricanes’ devastation. María completely exposed the poverty in Comerío. Women were the ones who took to the streets to fend for their families’ needs, and Casa Juana became part of the support, not only by aiding participants, but also by creating a diverse common space that included civic leaders and municipal government figures.”***

The relief work involved going into the ravished communities to offer assistance, as described by a participant:

***“After María hit, we had to take to the streets. We visited women, door-to-door, to see how they were doing. We had a team distributing aid. We also provided economic assistance to people identified by community leaders. I visited places that I didn’t know existed.”***

During this process, the organization received a great deal of aid from the diaspora, including Jorge Vidal, “a Peruvian resident of the United States who works with issues of masculinities and who fell in love with the work of Casa Juana and dared us to look beyond what we were doing,” said Soliván. Amari Torres from the Fondo de Acceso a la Justicia also approached the organization to offer guidance with respect to applying for funding. So, the first application for external funding was submitted to the Access to Justice Foundation, and it was successful. At the same time, Jorge Vidal encouraged the organization to write proposals, and Project Vera was created (from the diaspora) to promote healing through art, psychological support, and access-to-justice workshops.

***“At that time, we still didn’t have an administrative structure; the only salaried person on the team was Linette, who was paid with funds from the Access to Justice Foundation.” (Janice Soliván).***

In 2021, Casa Juana developed the Transforming for Peace project with funds from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW); the funds were targeted for case management, psychological support, and healing through art, and the project was launched in 2022. The grants made Casa’s operation more complex, and the need to develop an administrative structure became evident. Consequently, the Executive Director position was separated from the Board of Directors and Janice Solivan became director, albeit without a salary.



Thanks to a grant from the Fundación de Mujeres en Puerto Rico, the organization hired its first program manager as well as an administrative assistant. In the words of one of the interviewees:

*“By that time women were coming from all over the central region of the island; hundreds of women arrived, and it wasn't possible to channel them all to services. It was clear that we worked with a gender and restorative justice perspective, and that we had to be able to show the work that had been done, so we hired a program manager and an administrative assistant.”*

As services grew and diversified and external funding was obtained, salaried staff was recruited for conducting community outreach and providing services. The organization's growth made it necessary to formalize and professionalize their direct work with participants and administrative work, as described by a team member:

*“Now there were 12 of us working full-time. We organized our administration—created records, folders, improved filing, standardized documents, which allowed us to analyze information differently. We formalized the way we gather information, about people who are given appointments, people who receive assistance, and this allowed us to support new projects.”*

A member of the Board of Directors comments on the growing need to formalize organizational processes and procedures:

*“When an organization evolves, it needs a formal structure, and that's not always understood. It's about running a business with legal, financial, and compliance obligations, and it's a challenge. We had to evolve. We had a deeper presence in the community. When you saw the statistics, you thought, ‘something is happening,’ although statistics aren't the only thing.”*

With a grant from the Fundación de Mujeres en Puerto Rico, the organization was able to assign funds for the Executive Director's salary. Janice Soliván has been working full-time at Casa Juana since May 2023. Before that, she was a full-time teacher and worked at Casa Juana after meeting her teaching responsibilities. In the beginning, formalizing the organizational structure involved completing administrative processes for its finances as a nonprofit, developing internal procedures such as data collection and documentation of financial operations, and hiring an accountant.



During the past year, the organization has received grants and/or support from several academic institutions. For example, the Medical Sciences Campus of the University of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rico Public Health Trust are funding a project designed to train and develop Community Health Services Coordinators. With the support of Florida International University, the University of Utah, and the UPR Medical Sciences Campus, two photovoice projects have been completed, the most recent focusing on fair recovery in the aftermath of socio-natural disasters. In August and September 2023, the project was exhibited at Casa de la Cultura in Comerío. *Figure 1 shows two of the photo histories.*

*Figure 1 Photovoice Project Exhibit.*

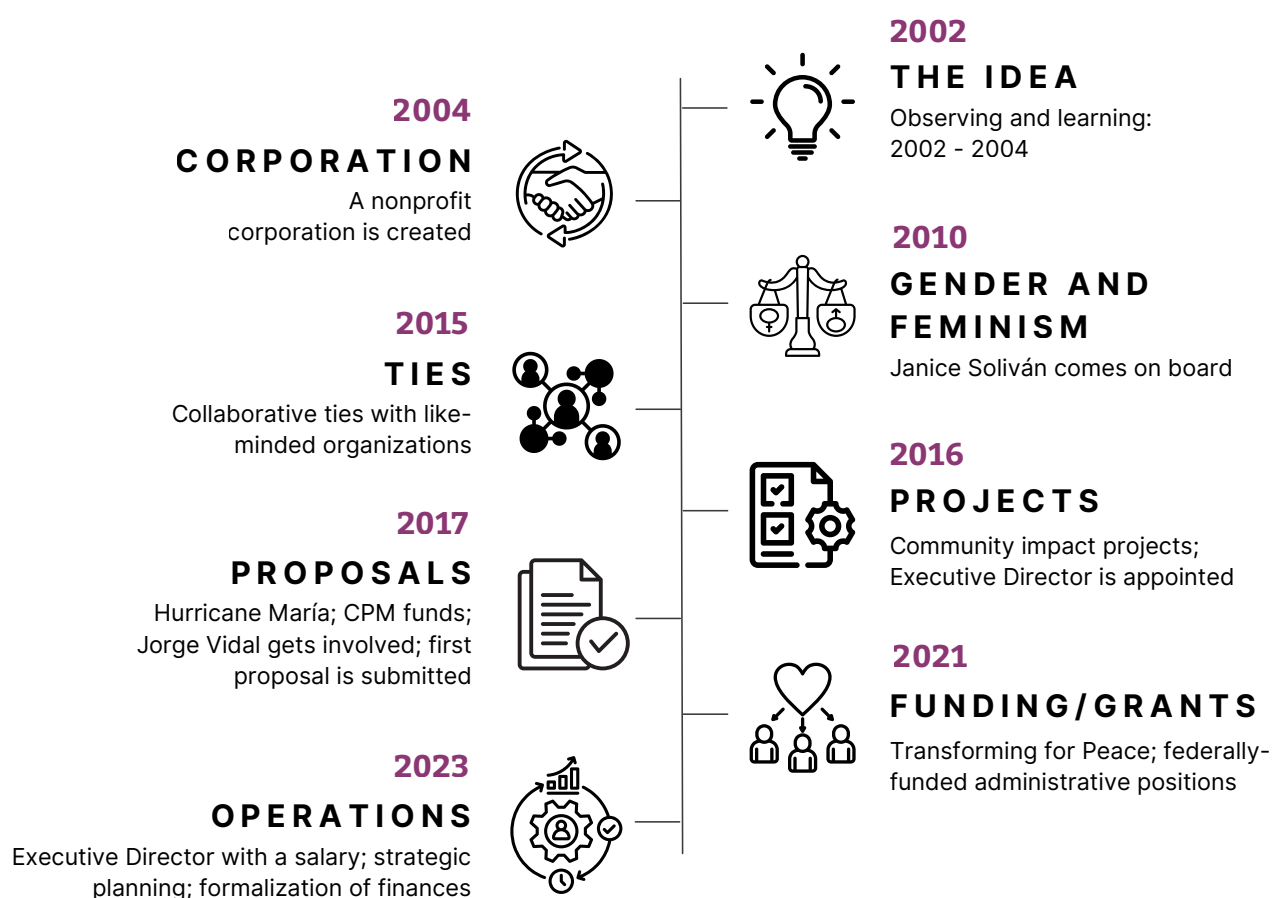


Funding has also come from Esperanza United for working with secondary victims of domestic violence. According to Janice Soliván, Casa Juana is now receiving approximately \$1 million in grants and has a staff of 14 people. "We have a wonderful work team," she said.

For some years now, the organization has been housed in a space provided by the municipality, located in Comerío's Cielito ward, and equipped with solar panels. The space was too small for the wide range of activities and services offered by the organization. A new space, also assigned by the municipality, is currently being used by the organization to complement the current space.

The composition and vision of the Board of Directors has changed, even though some members have been there for over five years. A strategic planning process was recently conducted, which included a revision of the mission, vision, values, and goals of Casa Juana and will now guide the work of the organization. This strategic planning process also included a review of the Board of Directors' role. Figure 2 summarizes Casa Colon's trajectory.

**Figure 2: Casa Juana Colon's Work History**



## The Casa Juana Colón Model

Although we could not find a document containing a description of the Casa Juana Colón model, their two decades of nonstop work demonstrate the central elements of the programmatic model on which the organization's current work is based. Casa Juana's philosophy and core objectives have remained the same through the years, and their present community action model reaffirms women's comprehensive transformation and the transformation of their environment so that they can be free and financially independent. This philosophy is represented by its core values—the principles of restorative justice, gender perspective, a comprehensive approach, and the protection of human rights—to prioritize community outreach and provide individual and group services. Figure 3 illustrates the organization's programmatic model.

*Figura 3: Modelo Programático*



This community action model is demonstrated in diverse ways, as described by one of the interviewees:

***“We are clear about the fact that we aren't going to parachute into places. We work in consultation with the communities about their needs and priorities. Many years ago, a woman was killed in a neighborhood and some children witnessed it. We approached the community thinking that we were going to work with adults, but we really had to work with the children.”***

With this model, Casa Juana's work has not been limited to individual action, but has expanded to multiple levels—groups, communities, and organizations.

The administrative model has gradually developed as the scope and nature of the services have expanded. For many years, the Board was the organization's only administrative and programmatic unit. As we saw in the previous section, it wasn't until 2021 that an Executive Director and support staff were appointed. Gradual acknowledgment of the importance of its financial operations has resulted in staff recruitment in this area, as reflected in current administrative procedures. Today, with its 14 employees and its Board of Directors, the administrative model is like those of other nonprofit organizations (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Administrative Model for Casa Juana Colón







However, currently there are discussions going on about making administrative processes more participatory, as the Executive Director indicates: **“My view is that we need to de-colonize institutions so that decisions are made horizontally.”**

### **Factors contributing to stability and to the achievement of goals and objectives**

The study enabled us to identify multiple factors that through the years have interacted and contributed to the achievement of goals and objectives as well as to Casa Juana’s stability. Some of these factors are highlighted below.

#### **The breadth of its mission and vision**

Although the wording of the organization's mission and vision may have changed over time, these continue to center of the importance of recognizing how the social context impacts on the life of women and their families and acknowledging their individual and collective ability to transform their specific contexts. The emphasis on women's strengths and empowerment has remained unchanged since the organization's founding.

#### **The commitment of the Board of Directors and the staff team**

Interviewees representing the various areas agree that the commitment of the Board of Directors and the work team has been an important feature of the organization since its onset. A member of the staff team describes it as follows: “The commitment of the work team to participants; our philosophy is that no one will be left unserved.” One participant expressed that this commitment is demonstrated by:

***“...the goodwill shown by Janice and Tere (who’s no longer here) and of the Board. Their kind hearts, their faith in us, trusting that we can do whatever we set out to do. Their willingness to do things, to help... when you visit Casa Juana, you feel everybody's warmth.”***

From another point of view, a volunteer believes that this commitment by the Board and staff:

*“...makes women want to say, ‘this is relevant, this is mine, this is important for me.’ We look out for them... do they need some groceries, do they have someone in the hospital? One woman had a child in the hospital, and we kept in touch with her, taking pampers and other supplies.”*

A member of the Board of Directors expressed it this way: “The Board’s commitment, wanting to do things differently; we didn’t want to simply copy other projects.” With the strategic planning process, in which the entire staff team was involved, the Board has revised its role. In the beginning, the Board acted as a planning and decision-making committee and carried out all organizational tasks. At this time, the Board understands that it should have a more active, dynamic role in supporting the work team, contributing to the organization’s financial security, and strengthening and diversifying its programs. One of its members expressed:

*“A big challenge remains for the Board of Directors; we need to keep up with Casa Juana’s services, we are lagging behind... few of us on the Board can immerse ourselves in the internal dynamic of the services... to have greater presence, not only as invitees but also as agents, and that’s important.”*

### **Ability to establish and maintain alliances with various sectors**

This is a recurring theme in all the sources of information we reviewed. From the beginning, Casa Juana has managed to establish alliances with diverse sectors in and outside the town of Comerío. The organization has developed alliances with the religious sector, the municipal government, and with small businesses in town. Since 2015 it has formed partnerships with like-minded organizations, especially with Coordinadora Paz para la Mujer, Casa Pensamiento de Mujer, and Proyecto Matria. A member of the Board of Directors describes it this way:

*“Casa Juana is known for working collaboratively. What you may think of as a weak point—religion and politics—is not in this case. During the pandemic, a “Junte Comunitario,” was activated to bring together all community organizations. There is integration with other sectors. Janice has been strategic; she has managed to gain access to the municipality and groups such as churches and businesses.”*



As Casa Juana's work gained recognition, other organizations and entities offered opportunities for collaboration and even funding, as is the case with several universities. Some of these alliances have resulted in the development of new projects and partnerships, as other organizations come to know Casa Juana's work.

### **Solidarity as a Central Value**

A fundamental principle that has guided the organization's work is solidarity—towards women in vulnerable situations, towards communities living in poverty, and towards like-minded organizations. This solidarity is reflected in the motto adopted by the entire staff team, “No one is left unserved here,” and evidenced by Casa Juana's response in the aftermath of Hurricane María in 2017. As one volunteer says:

*“They help people; they try to be as helpful as possible; if they can't, they find another center that can help them. We help by bringing information to the communities. They do everything, they help sick people, they offer aid, going beyond economic assistance; they have a psychologist, a social worker. They give the support and look further to see if other types of issues exist. I like to help, and they helped me. I lost my child; they taught me a lot. We are a family.”*

### **Recognition and assertion of the organization's autonomy**

Although the organization has developed a significant level of social capital with its alliances and partnerships in various sectors, Casa Juana asserts its autonomy and independence when defining the course of its goals, objectives, and actions. Their distinctive autonomy allows them to freely comment on, and at times condemn, situations and processes that adversely impact women and communities, while always proposing alternatives to these situations and processes. A member of the Board describes it this way:

*“We have taken a stand on difficult issues—we believe in action. An example is Karina's case... what she experienced was a repetition of Juana Colon's situation. We have been very vocal about protecting the rights of women.”*



This autonomy is noted and appreciated by participants and volunteers at Casa Juana: “There’s lot of politics at play in these towns. But Casa Juana is not political, they listen to everyone, and they don’t talk about politics. The municipality doesn’t meddle. I like the fact that it’s not for this or for that.” Casa Juana’s assertive autonomy is also appreciated by the Board of Directors:

*“...cooperatives, civic organizations, we made an alliance with a protestant church, carried out several activities at the church. Casa Juana does not get involved in party politics, that’s been clear from the beginning. We discussed this when deciding if we were going to accept help from the municipal government; we received the help because we are part of the town, not because we are aligned with the municipal government. In fact, we tend to be very critical in that respect.”*

### **Ability to Negotiate**

The Board of Directors and its Executive Director have shown a great ability to negotiate with the different sectors they work with, such as the municipal government, other organizations, and funders. Thanks to their characteristic negotiation skills, the Board has managed to obtain various physical spaces where they can provide services, as well as funding and multiple collaborative agreements.

### **Diversification of its scope and services with regard to transformations in the needs of women and communities**

Casa Juana’s focus has always been women; understanding that changes in women’s lives will occur only when there are transformations in their diverse social contexts has fostered the development and implementation of creative, innovative initiatives. These initiatives include the María Teresa Vázquez Marrero scholarship for high school students, the upcoming program to assist secondary victims, the health services coordinator or navigator project, and the expansion of services to include male victims of gender violence. At this time, Casa Juana is considering the conceptualization and implementation of a project to address masculinities. So, given that reality is multidimensional and intersectional, Casa Juana has diversified its approach and its services in response to the changes the communities are experiencing:





***“We are in constant movement. For participants to have access, the organization cannot be static. Situations cannot be handled in the same manner. Sometimes we need to address emergencies and I frequently need to do advocacy work (Board member).”***

Casa Juana's ability to innovate and transform is sometimes surprising, even for Board members, as was the case with the health services coordinators or navigators project:

***“This was a novel idea; I never imagined we would develop a project like this one. It positively broke down the misconceptions of what Casa Juana's services are. For a person to insert themselves in the community and make health services accessible is a plus for the services... an option for the entire community, the elderly, the people who do not know how to read and write or lack technological skills. It's another way of having a presence in the community, from another position. Casa Juana—a multifarious organization.”***

### **Wide exposure through various means and public recognition by various means**

Casa Juana has been highly creative in the use of diverse strategies to gain visibility and recognition for the work they do. At the start, and for a long time afterwards, the organization made itself known by word of mouth. In fact, one participant said that Casa Juana's best promotion was provided by its participants. Various means of promotion and advertising were gradually introduced; some were requested by the work team and others offered by certain sectors of the town of Comerío. One of the interviewees summed it up in this manner:

***“We began at the local level—the people who came recommended us to others. In 2010 we began to make personal visits to institutions, such as the Department of the Family, for example, and displayed announcements in key buildings, such as the post office and the church. We announced our activities in parish leaflets; at times we used loudspeakers to make announcements. There's a regional radio program—El Café de las tres—where we sometimes participated, and people still refer to that program. We have made presentations before the municipal legislature.”***



More recently, the organization has been using technology to strengthen dissemination of their services, through social networks and a webpage, for example. A volunteer's testimony illustrates the multiple ways in which the organization has made itself known:

*“Word got around that they help people who are sick. Now they have access to the Internet, before they didn't. We asked them to come; one thing led to another until they came for help. People ask around, they find it online and they ask about it. A while back people weren't aware that they did so many things, now they've made themselves known. Now people come on their own, or a participant tells them about it. People are asking us.”*

### **Developing connections with academic institutions**

Members of the Board of Directors and work team recognize that reaching out to academic institutions, especially universities in Puerto Rico and abroad, has produced significant contributions. During the last 6 years, collaborative projects have been established with the Medical Sciences Campus of the University of Puerto Rico, Carlos Albizu University, Florida International University, and the University of Utah. These ties have allowed Casa Juana to develop collaborative projects, bring new resources on board by becoming a practice center, and receive funds from some of these institutions.

### **Obtaining external funding**

During the past six years, Casa Juana has been successful in submitting funding proposals for some of its projects. Opening themselves up to presenting grant proposals has significantly contributed to strengthening, diversifying, and expanding the services offered by the organization. Although Casa Juana has been receiving donations from different funders, groups, and individuals since it was founded, recent access to grants from external [federal] funding has allowed the organization to have greater access to human and financial resources, resulting in greater stability.

### **The leadership of Janice Soliván and other members of the Board of Directors**

All the interviewees recognize and greatly appreciate the leadership of the Executive Director, Janice Soliván.



Although everyone acknowledges that each component of Casa Juana has an essential role in its success and stability, they all emphasize how their director's experience, commitment, and dynamic leadership has sustained them for the past thirteen years.

### **A clear identity and Juana Colón's example**

From the beginning, the Board of Directors established that the organization would have a unique identity that would reflect its aspirations, philosophy, and values. Juana Colón is a central figure in the identity that has been built by Casa Juana—a strong identity that is intentionally sustained by its physical space, in the organizational logo, the graphic materials it produces, as well as in events such as Loas a Juana Colón and the public stance Casa Juana takes with respect to issues of gender, human rights, and race, among others. Two of the interviewees said:

***“On the contrary, we have revindicated the figure of Juana Colón, her combative nature—a characteristic that we share—and Casa Juana's clear insertion into the social fabric to promote transformation from within.”***

***“The name itself is a vindication of gender and race, of the values of the founders and the culture that has been developed. Juana has a historic place; the subject has been discussed in publications and we have adopted it in our philosophy. The Board, because of its composition, has the experience, it has the consciousness. A cultural project called La Ruta de Juana is in the works.”***

### **Efficiency and quality of services**

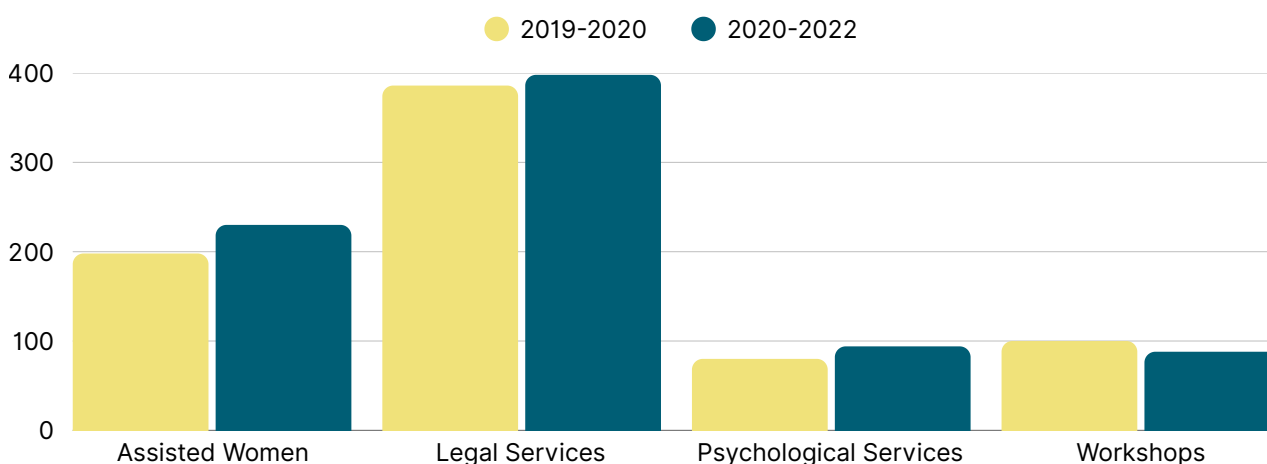
Although the members of the Board and staff acknowledge that they still need to improve in terms of recording statistical data about the services they offer, they have already taken steps in that direction.

A recent 2023 report on an evaluation conducted by Loannisely Berríos, doctoral student in the Social Determinants of Health Program of the UPR Medical Sciences Campus, indicates that Casa Juana is currently offering services to 104 women and 5 men, most of them between the ages of 33 and 37. Of these, 97% report having been victims of gender violence.



The 2019-2020 annual report of the Sanart I project indicates that, during that period, 185 women received legal guidance, advice, or representation as well as emotional support. Specifically, the organization offered 370 legal services and 56 psychological services; 29 persons were referred to external agencies, and 102 women participated in psychoeducational workshops. During the second year of the project, 2020-2022, the number of assisted women increased to 233 and legal services reached 382. Psychological services grew to 71. Figure 5 illustrates this data.

Figure 5: Participants in Sanart I y II



Additionally, the staff team evaluates participant satisfaction in several of their programs, and consistently registers high levels of satisfaction with the services, as expressed by a participant:

***"I wasn't getting any rest; I cried a lot. They have given me strategies to stop thinking about my losses. I'm not so depressed anymore, I feel good. People see me and say, 'that's not the xxx that I used to know.' They tell me I've changed a lot. Before, I felt insecure, hung-up; I reacted to comments about being overweight. Now, I think it doesn't matter what people say, I need to keep going forward. I live in Aguas Buenas and travel to Comerío. Before, I had no psychologist and no mentor. The Court didn't want to give me the parent workshops. The lawyer had to fight for them to assign the workshops, and this next Tuesday I will complete them. Luisa helps me with that, and when she can't, Ana and Janice do. They always make time to help me."***





## The diaspora

After Hurricane María in 2017, Casa Juana has been building collaborative relationships with members of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States. Their collaboration has been expressed in various ways: with aid provided by diverse groups and individuals to help Comerío communities recover; by identifying funding opportunities for ongoing and/or new projects; with support in drafting grant proposals for external funding; and by

## Challenges faced by Casa Juana through the decades

One of Casa Juana Colón's main strengths is its ability to address and respond to the multiple challenges it has faced during its two decades of continuous work. The following are descriptions of the principal challenges as noted by interviewees.

### Economic Factors

This has been a constant challenge through the years, bringing uncertainty with respect to Casa Juana's sustainability. The lack of recurrent funding has often prevented the organization from making long-term plans for some of its projects. The staff team pointed to this in their comments: “When the funds run out, the work stops.” Nevertheless, the flexibility and creativity of the Board of Directors and the Executive Director have led to identifying new and bigger sources of funding and allowed them to not only sustain core programs, but also add new populations or groups to their work.

### Limited Space

The space limitations that Casa Juana has had to deal with throughout the organization's life have not stopped it from operating. Its previous space is quite small and had been a challenge, not only because it's difficult to house the entire staff, but also because a good part of the work with participants requires privacy and confidentiality. Additional space is currently needed for providing childcare while mothers receive services from the organization. Once again, the ability to create partnerships, negotiate, and innovate has allowed the organization to find solutions to these limitations—today they have a larger space, while also keeping the previous one.



## **Tough conditions for non-governmental organizations**

State requirements for nonprofits, especially those working with women, create tough conditions for these organizations. These conditions have economic repercussions because they require hiring specialized staff to address them. For example, it is impossible to access funding from some agencies if the nonprofit's financial statements have not been audited, which entails a substantial expense for the organization.

## **Difficulty in getting people to attend educational activities**

After the COVID pandemic, it's been difficult for Casa Juana to get women to participate in their educational activities, especially the workshops. Some interviewees believe that people have been avoiding these types of spaces since the pandemic. The staff is currently developing strategies to deal with this challenge, including greater use of social networks.

## **Mixed results of the small business incubator project among participants**

As mentioned earlier in this report, although 35 participants were certified as artisans and encouraged to start an entrepreneurship project, only one participant is creating a small candle-making business. From the point of view of a member of the Board of Directors, the transition to entrepreneurship may be influenced by several factors:

*"We need to do further work with the participants with respect to their human capital so that they gain self-confidence and feel secure enough to open up to risk, because the road is risky. So that they feel in control of their lives. Train them, pave the way towards different initiatives that will support them financially. They need someone who leads them step by step, who accompanies them and supports them on the way. Setting up a business is not an easy task, especially in a little town like ours. It needs to include the before—making the decision and taking action—and the after, "How do I create a structure for myself, how do I stay afloat with the challenges I face?" It's not enough to have the capital, it's also about who is there, who is developing the entrepreneurship project. Let's suppose that she sets up a kiosk to sell popsicles. One thing is selling them from home, and another is running a cart business—there are insecurities, relationships with customers. We need to delve more deeply."*



A member of the staff team describes other possible reasons for these results:

*“Some of them didn’t want to do it alone, others didn’t want to lose their economic assistance, this is what women go through. Some have medical conditions, they have children with health issues such as autism, they have to deal with a public health system that has basically collapsed—all of these things hinder their development. This is the drama they live with. Additionally, our resource at the time didn’t have the right pedagogical vision; she had problems managing the group. The methodology could improve...I would like to change the methodology—I think it’s essential for empowering women. I’m not satisfied.”*

### **The dilemma of autonomy vs. receiving external funding**

To the extent that more external funding is obtained to support programs, a dilemma also arises: will its autonomy, which is so important for the organization, be affected with the influx of external funds and with having to comply with the guidelines and/or requirements imposed by funders? Some of the interviewees are already talking about this challenge:

*“Our smugness about how ‘we are self-sufficient, we can do it’, fell through, because the need is greater every day, and thank God Janice helped us realize that if we want to go on, we need to look further, towards alliances with funding agencies that will help us finance our projects. When Casa Juana began, I could not imagine we were going to do this. We went from a limited, self-sufficient view to seeing that we had to be open to finding funders to help us finance our programs. We also realized that the Board of Directors could not play all the bases, as was our original intent. We needed to look for people trained for specific services, people with experience beyond Comerío, we needed to get together with others to see what they were doing and how.”*

### **Tension between volunteer work and the professionalization of services**

This is a recent challenge, rising from the need to open spaces up to potential participants, spaces that may already be occupied by the volunteers who have traditionally worked with Casa Juana Colón. Additionally, the complexity of the work conducted by the organization has required hiring specialized staff to do it, and this has been perceived by some volunteers as displacement or rejection.



This challenge also reflects Casa Juana's dilemma with respect to its two main goals—community outreach and the provision of services. Professionalizing services could restrain community outreach work. People in all the areas consulted recognize that they need to reflect on this challenge and address it. A member of the Board of Directors puts it this way:

*“We've had a volunteer base. Volunteering has its pros can cons. When an organization evolves, it needs a formal structure, and that's not always understood. It's about running a business with legal, financial, and compliance obligations, and it's a challenge. We've had to evolve.”*

A member of the staff reflects on the subject:

*“We had a self-management project related to arts and crafts and woodworking, but volunteers would monopolize it. Casa Juana has a philosophy—workshops are not designed to merely entertain. The number of workshops was reduced, and they felt they were being displaced. There was a clash, and the workshops were put on hold.”*

The following is a volunteer's point of view:

*“The proposal came up; there was no interaction so that we could get to know each other when the proposal team came. They all have master's and doctorate degrees. The lawyer is from Comerío and everybody loves her. Some people were opposed because there was no introduction, which created conflict. I'm a teacher.*

*Janice has always been open... we were good when we were broke, now we're not. When they told me about the strategic plan, I said: 'There's going to be changes, new strategies, and missteps.' In terms of the workshops, with the decision to stop them they've lost the people who supported Casa Juana for so long. There are things we are starting to lose; that's our concern.”*

## Conclusions

The results of this case study can be summarized in the following terms: the stability and efficiency of a nonprofit organization with a gender perspective that is guided by the values of principles of restorative justice, gender perspective, a comprehensive approach, and protection of human rights, can be explained by multiple factors that intersect and influence its processes, including a commitment to all sectors, a comprehensive vision of the social contexts in which they work, solidarity, autonomy, the ability to establish alliances and partnerships, the formalization of administrative processes, and flexibility and creativity, among others.

The study also suggests the long-term nature of the work of nonprofit organizations such as Casa Juana Colón, which will be successful if it is developed with perseverance, tenacity, and patience. Casa Juana's history reveals that organizational processes need to mature to develop a clear mission and vision as well as a model that engages in various levels of action (not solely the individual level) and prioritizes community action and women's empowerment within the environment in which they live.

The two participants interviewed for this study enthusiastically agree with respect to the programs and services that the organization should develop in the future (e.g., secondary victims, masculinities, older persons) to be consistent with the vision of transforming people, communities, and other environments. There are challenges to be faced in the future.

The findings from this study suggest that Casa Juana Colón should continue defining the conceptual and administrative models that will guide them in the pursuit of sustainability, stability, and the attainment of their goals. Establishing and implementing the strategic plan as well as any work plans that may arise from it also creates a challenge in the process of professionalizing and formalizing policies and procedures, including the dilemma posed by the role of volunteers in the organization.



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