

Immigrant Women in NYC in the Aftermath of COVID-19: Challenges and Approaches to Coping

BACKGROUND

In the US, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing health and socioeconomic challenges faced by low-income immigrant communities. These included limited access to health care, unemployment and financial strain, housing and food insecurity, and structural discrimination. Immigrants without legal status were excluded from pandemic relief aid. Of immigrants who were eligible, many did not access benefits because of mistrust of public institutions or fear of deportation. Immigrants have also experienced increased mental health distress. Yet despite increased need for mental health support, immigrants underutilize mental health services compared with their US-born counterparts, often due to stigma and other barriers like accessibility, cost, and lack of culturally competent care. Immigrant women may be particularly vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes due to inequitable gendered burdens in their productive and reproductive lives, such as essential work, unpaid caregiving, and exposure to domestic violence. We are just beginning to understand the needs of immigrant women in the aftermath of the pandemic. One goal of this research was to explore how community-based organizations (CBOs) can assist women and their communities post-pandemic. Another goal was to examine whether journaling might help immigrant women feel more supported and, if so, in what ways.



Photo Credit: Canva.com

THE STUDY: “CHECKING IN: VOICES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN NYC”

In the Spring of 2023, researchers from the [Pandemic Journaling Project](#) – an online journaling platform and research study – partnered with CBOs in New York City (NYC) to conduct a study that explored ongoing challenges related to COVID-19 among immigrant women. As a second aim, the study explored the feasibility and efficacy of implementing an online journaling-based project with a population of immigrant women.

Participants in the study included 34 women from two immigrant communities in NYC that were particularly hard-hit by the pandemic: the South Asian and Latinx communities. Participants, who were recruited by CBO partners, ranged in age from 21-66 years old. Data were gathered using three complementary research methods. First, participants engaged in bi-weekly online journaling in response to specific prompts for a six-month period. Second, they participated in 1 or 2 qualitative interviews with members of our research team. Finally, some attended a focus group at the end of the project to discuss their experiences of participation in the study. Findings show how the impact of the pandemic on women in both communities persisted long after the World Health Organization’s official declaration, on May 5th, 2023, declaring that COVID-19 was no longer a global health emergency. Findings also highlight key sources of support for women in coping with and overcoming adversity.

RESULTS

Financial Instability

Many women reported that financial instability was a pressing issue in the aftermath of the pandemic. For several participants, this issue was their primary ongoing concern. Some women and/or the primary breadwinners in their families experienced job loss during the pandemic and, at the time of study participation (2023-24), still had not regained full-time employment. A few were burdened by hefty medical bills for health problems that they or family members experienced during the pandemic. As a result, many women struggled to make ends meet. Housing insecurity was a particularly pressing issue among women who reported financial hardship. Some were months behind in rent, and one woman faced eviction. Some women expressed a need for additional support in learning how to navigate bureaucratic pathways for accessing things like rental assistance, personal loans, and legal counsel.

“I don't have money to pay what we owe, nor do I have money to go out and look for a new apartment. Because here they want three months' rent. I do not work. How can I move to another apartment if I don't have a job?” (66-year-old, Dominican Republic).

Mental Health Distress

In addition to financial hardship, women in our study also continued to struggle with a range of emotional difficulties, including stress, anxiety, loneliness, social isolation, and grief after the loss of loved ones. For some, mental health distress was compounded by financial instability or circumstances that prolonged social isolation, such as joblessness or self-quarantine due to being at a higher risk of complications were they to contract COVID-19. Other women continued to grieve loved ones who passed away during the pandemic – sadness that was often exacerbated by women's inability to properly say goodbye to departed loved ones or give them a proper funeral.

“... my brother's son died at such a young age, leaving behind a small child and a young wife. Allah took him away before our eyes due to such a disease. It's painful” (43-year-old, Bangladesh).

Role of CBOs

CBOs played an important role in helping women cope with the long-term economic and emotional impacts of COVID-19 in two main ways. First, CBOs provided opportunities for women to develop new skills for improving their employment prospects, including courses in English proficiency, resume building, and computer literacy. Many of our participants worked as freelancers and appreciated opportunities to expand their professional networks and profiles. Second, CBOs created a space for women to connect with other people in their communities, which fostered a sense of belonging. Several women described how volunteer roles, and in some cases paid work, with CBOs were particularly important entry points into CBO involvement. These women appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with and support others in their communities, in addition to receiving support themselves. Involvement in these new roles reinforced a sense of mutual care among CBO workers and clients.

“There are women from all over the world, so we have been able to talk and we have realized that we have the same concerns, the same problems. That has helped me a lot... I found myself [through those friendships]” (52-year-old, Mexico).

Psychosocial Benefits of Online Journaling

Participants' reflections on their experiences participating in our study suggest that online journaling may provide immigrant women with a meaningful outlet for processing difficult life events and complex emotions, especially for those with limited access to other sources of social and/or professional support. Many women likened journaling to a form of “therapy,” saying that it provided a means of catharsis and a source of comfort. They appreciated the ability to control when, where, and how they recorded their reflections, including their control over the extent to which they engaged in face-to-face contact with researchers and other participants. Many enjoyed opportunities to discuss their journal reflections and experiences with others during interviews and focus groups, and would have liked more events to bring participants together. For several women, journaling generated empathy and helped them identify with others – something one woman described as a welcome escape from the social fragmentation and isolation caused by the pandemic. A few women shared that journaling generated strong emotions, such as sadness and grief, through the recounting of past events.

“The pandemic created among us a capsule where everyone wanted to protect themselves. And you were afraid of interacting with everyone... So when [the project] asked me these questions [about other people, neighbors, children]... there was a very strong solidarity that I hadn't felt until I started writing” (50-year-old, Dominican Republic).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

CBOs have played an important role in addressing unmet needs of immigrant women and their communities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. To continue to provide effective programming, we offer the following recommendations. CBOs can:

1 Help women improve opportunities for employment and societal integration, for instance by expanding the availability and variety of courses for training and education. Study participants embraced capacity-building opportunities provided by CBOs. Beyond existing opportunities, some participants identified an unmet need for training and education in additional areas, such as navigating bureaucracy and improving financial wellbeing. Courses that focus on English proficiency (at various levels) and professional preparedness and networking (e.g., resume building, starting your own business) are also likely to be especially valuable.

2 Prioritize activities that promote socializing and community-building, both in-person and in online/hybrid format. Study participants emphasized the value of CBOs for providing an outlet from ongoing periods of boredom and social isolation. Opportunities for volunteer work and collaboration, such as mutual aid neighborhood collectives, may be a particularly promising route for broadening women's social support networks and opportunities for community involvement.

3 Consider developing journaling-based projects as an additional source of psychosocial support. Journaling with immigrant women in a community-based setting is likely to be most effective when participants are offered 1) clear guidelines for participation that allow flexibility regarding when, where and how they record their reflections; 2) optional in-person activities to reflect on the journaling process and share insights generated through journaling with others; and 3) clear pathways to additional mental health support and resources, particularly in light of emotional distress that might surface through the journaling process.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the participating organizations and to all of the women who shared their perspectives and experiences with us.

This study was conducted by the Pandemic Journaling Project with funding support from the Peter G. Peterson Foundation. Additional information about the findings presented in this report can be found at:

- Wurtz, H.M., Flores, A., Willen, S.S., Mason, K.A. 2024. Engaging Immigrant Women in Online Journaling as a Mode of Research and Psychosocial Support: Lessons Learned. *Practicing Anthropology*. DOI: [10.1080/08884552.2024.2374296](https://doi.org/10.1080/08884552.2024.2374296)
- Wurtz, H.M., Alam, P., Jimenez, M., Flores, A., Mason, K.A., Willen, S.S. Rebuilding Lives: Immigrant Women's Experiences with Community-based Organizations in New York City in the Aftermath of the Pandemic (in preparation)

