

Experiences of Immigrant Women in Canada During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic, with school closures, shutdowns of non-essential workplaces, and extended household lockdowns, intensified existing inequalities and created economic, social, and health challenges for immigrant women. Most research has focused on the impacts on employment and mental health, while less is known about how personal relationships and community connections shaped their experiences during the pandemic (Nardon et al., 2021; Scott, 2024). Similarly, there is limited understanding of immigrant women's post-pandemic experiences and how factors such as race, gender, immigration status, and location influence their recovery (Biswas et al., 2024; Bryan et al., 2024).

This research uses intersectionality and socioecological frameworks to explore the lived experiences of immigrant women in Canada during and after the COVID-19 pandemic through two qualitative studies. Study 1 involved interviews with 18 immigrant women to examine experiences during the pandemic, focusing on:

- How immigrant women in Canada experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The coping strategies and support systems they accessed to manage the pandemic's impacts.

Study 2 involved interviews with 20 immigrant women to investigate post-pandemic experiences, asking:

- What life changes first-generation immigrant women experienced after COVID-19.
- How they recovered from the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic.

Intersectionality theory helps examine how social identities, such as race, gender, immigration status, age, and socioeconomic status, shape experiences of both privilege and systemic inequality (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). The *socioecological model (SEM)* provides a multilevel perspective, acknowledging that individual experiences are influenced by many layers:

- Individual – personal characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours.
- Interpersonal – social networks and support systems, such as family and friends.
- Institutional – organizational settings beyond the household, including schools, workplaces, and universities.
- Community – groups or areas defined by geography, shared characteristics, social interactions, and local structures.
- Public policy – laws and policies at local, state, and national levels that affect individuals' lives.

By combining intersectionality and the socioecological model, this research examines how both personal identities and broader social contexts shaped immigrant women's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic period.

Findings

Study 1: Pandemic Experiences and Support Systems

Individual Contexts

Study 1 participants described serious mental and physical health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. These difficulties were often linked to fear of the virus, strict public health restrictions, major disruptions to daily life, and the pain of seeing loved ones struggle.

- **Mental health issues:** Many women reported feeling depressed, stressed, or overwhelmed. They spoke about difficulties concentrating, constant fear of catching the virus, and reluctance to go outside. Some described feelings of helplessness, frustration, loneliness, or guilt—whether from surviving while others did not, or from decisions they regretted. Others lost motivation for everyday activities and future goals. Grieving the loss of loved ones was deeply traumatic, and some compared their experiences to family and friends back home, feeling jealous that restrictions in Canada were stricter.
- **Physical health issues:** A smaller number of participants became sick with COVID-19 or other illnesses, dealt with pre-existing immune system issues, or found wearing masks for long periods physically uncomfortable and suffocating.

To cope with the difficulties brought on by the pandemic, participants used various strategies, including self-reflection, resilience, and adaptation:

- **Self-reflection:** For some, the pandemic was a chance to pause and think about their lives. They reflected on their past choices, future goals, and the importance of social support. Seeing how others were also struggling made them feel less alone and sometimes helped them recognize their own advantages, such as having family close by, fewer caregiving responsibilities, stable jobs, or access to resources in Canada that were not as available in their home countries.
- **Resilience and adaptation:** Many participants showed resilience by finding ways to cope with uncertainty and stress of the pandemic. They kept a positive outlook, relied on faith and cultural traditions, and focused on adapting to changing circumstances, overcoming challenges, living in the present, and prioritizing their happiness. They also found comfort in everyday activities, such as walking in nature, exercising, doing art, journaling, gardening, caring for pets, spending time with family, watching comedies, or simply catching up on sleep. Online platforms were another key tool for finding information and emotional support.

Interpersonal Contexts

During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants felt closer to family and leaned on supportive friendships, but they also faced challenges such as being separated from loved ones abroad, dealing with lockdowns, navigating marital conflicts, coping with grief, handling heavier household chores, and managing increased responsibilities as mothers.

- **Stronger family bonding:** For many, the pandemic brought families closer together. Support from family members in Canada and back home, shared activities like picnics, reunions after long separations, and repairing strained relationships helped strengthen family bonds.

- **Supportive friendships:** Friendships provided important support during the pandemic. Participants relied on long-term friendships, whether within their cultural communities or with close personal networks, to stay connected and feel supported.
- **Family and household challenges:** Some participants faced difficulties, such as being separated from loved ones across borders, coping with lockdown routines in cramped homes, or managing marital conflicts. The grief of losing family members to COVID-19, especially when travel restrictions prevented visits, added extra emotional strain.
- **Increased household and caregiving responsibilities:** Many married participants, especially mothers, experienced heavier domestic workloads. Traditional gender roles meant they handled most household chores while their spouses focused on outside tasks. Mothers also balanced multiple roles—supporting their children’s mental health, helping with remote schooling, keeping them engaged, showing emotional strength, and managing the household—leading to feelings of being overwhelmed.

Economic (Institutional) Contexts

Participants faced both economic challenges and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. They experienced unemployment, financial strain, and difficulties in workplaces and businesses. Remote platforms brought mixed results—offering flexibility and new opportunities but also creating obstacles, especially for newcomers. Participants also received some support from employers and educational institutions, though barriers often limited access to these resources.

- **Unemployment and financial strains:** The pandemic recession and rising inflation created significant financial strain. Many participants faced job losses, layoffs, unstable work opportunities, or slowed businesses. These pressures were especially hard for immigrants, who often had to cope with anti-immigrant attitudes, the responsibility of sending money to family back home, and settlement-related barriers such as lack of Canadian work experience or difficulty validating foreign credentials. For widowed mothers and immigrant women carrying heavy financial responsibilities, these challenges were even greater.
- **Workplace and business difficulties:** While some participants were able to keep jobs, find new opportunities, or even launch businesses that supported their well-being, others experienced reduced income and limited business growth. Precarious work, especially in frontline or retail roles, often came with reduced hours, mistreatment, racism, and ageism. At the same time, these roles sometimes offered social connections that helped participants’ well-being. Workplace discrimination and implicit racism were reported across different job sectors.
- **Mixed experiences with remote work and learning:** Remote platforms played a central role in employment, education, and professional development. Many participants appreciated the flexibility, time savings, and opportunities for self-care and family connection. Others, particularly newcomers, struggled with the quality of online learning, adapting to digital systems, and heavier workloads—especially those supporting clients, such as settlement workers.
- **Employment and education support and barriers:** Some participants accessed valuable support from employers, including recognition, COVID-related compensation, health benefits, and letters for government aid. Educational institutions also offered assistance with credential assessments, translation services, and guidance on Canadian

work culture. However, participants frequently encountered barriers such as unclear information, services that were not tailored to immigrant needs, and complicated processes for bursaries or credential validation.

Healthcare (Institutional) Contexts

Participants used healthcare services during the COVID-19 pandemic—most often for mental health support—but encountered a range of barriers, both structural and pandemic-related.

- **Accessing healthcare services:** Many participants sought healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic for both physical and mental health needs. They used a range of services, including in-person, phone, or online consultations with doctors (especially family doctors), emergency room visits for cold or COVID-19 symptoms, and surgeries or treatments for non-COVID conditions. Mental health care was a major area of need, with most participants seeking some form of support or resources.
- **Structural barriers to accessing healthcare:** Accessing healthcare was not always straightforward. Participants reported long wait times to see specialists, high costs for medications and mental health therapy, and difficulty securing a family doctor. Language barriers and limited interpretation services further restricted access for many.
- **Pandemic-specific barriers to accessing healthcare:** The pandemic created additional barriers on top of these structural issues. Reduced availability of doctors, limited urgent care for non-COVID conditions, and navigating new hospital rules made it harder for participants to get timely care.

Housing (Institutional) Contexts

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants struggled to find rental housing, lived in cramped spaces, and faced challenges maintaining privacy in shared living arrangements.

- **Challenges in securing housing:** Some participants faced major difficulties finding rental housing, including experiences of racism and culturally insensitive questions or comments from landlords.
- **Living conditions and space constraints:** Some participants had to live in small or shared spaces, such as cramped apartments, basement units, or with roommates, due to limited housing options.
- **Impact on daily life and privacy:** Limited personal space created challenges in managing shared living arrangements, including restrictions on hosting visitors, as some participants could not invite guests without their roommates' approval.

Community Contexts

During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants' community experiences were shaped by their identities, where they lived, and their social connections, as well as settlement challenges, personal circumstances, and broader pandemic-related barriers. These factors contributed to feelings of isolation, declines in social skills, and both the need for and challenges in accessing community support. Some participants volunteered to help their communities, while others faced racism and anti-immigrant discrimination.

- **Isolation and declined social skills:** Many participants spoke about feeling socially isolated and noticing a decline in their social skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was linked to avoiding in-person interactions and cultural gatherings because of public

health measures and fear of infection, as well as personal circumstances like being immunocompromised, caring for children, or following landlords' restrictions. For newcomers to Canada, these challenges were even greater. Limited social networks, housing struggles, unfamiliarity with Canadian culture, the harsh winter, and difficulty connecting with the wider community made isolation worse. While the early years of the pandemic were especially challenging due to public health restrictions, reliance on online platforms, and fears of infection, some newcomers reported gradually adapting to life in Canada as lockdowns were lifted.

- **Access to community support and volunteering:** Many participants relied on community supports—including settlement agencies, faith- and community-based groups, women's networks, and cultural organizations—to navigate pandemic challenges and life as newcomers. These programs, offered online and in person, promoted women's empowerment, wellness, religious learning, language development, and culturally sensitive guidance, helping participants build personal, professional, and financial skills. Some also volunteered in their communities, organizing activities, running wellness programs, sharing health information, and providing emotional or material support to neighbours.
- **Barriers to community support:** While many participants benefited from community supports, they also faced challenges. Pandemic-related issues included difficulties using online platforms, closures of settlement agencies, and limits of remote services. Structural barriers, such as limited awareness of free programs, language challenges, and dissatisfaction with service quality, made access harder. As lockdowns eased, some participants reported better access to community programs through hybrid options and improved availability of information.
- **Racism and anti-immigrant discrimination:** Some participants reported experiencing racism, anti-immigrant microaggressions, and overt discrimination, which made them feel excluded or "othered." They also noted that media coverage of COVID-19 often focused on certain countries while overlooking others. These challenges were closely tied to their immigrant and racialized identities, including their non-White appearance, accents, and origins from non-Western countries.

Policy Contexts

Participants were affected by COVID-19 policies, such as air travel restrictions. While many participants were able to access government crisis financial aid, some faced difficulties in obtaining this support.

- **Air travel restrictions:** Some participants encountered various challenges related to international air travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. These difficulties affected both newcomers traveling to Canada as well as those wanting to visit their home countries. Challenges included flight cancellations, limited availability of alternate or longer flight routes, higher costs for alternate flights, navigating complex COVID-19 protocols at airports, and the inability to communicate with others during flights due to fear of virus transmission.
- **Accessing specialized government supports:** Many participants received financial support from federal and provincial governments to help cope with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included benefits such as the Canada Emergency Response

Benefit (CERB), additional compensation for frontline workers, small business fee waivers, and childcare assistance for mothers. Some newcomer participants also received support for settlement needs, including virtual consultations, help with living expenses, childcare subsidies, and funds for work or education. Some participants reported positive experiences accessing these government services during the pandemic.

- **Barriers to accessing government supports:** Many participants were unable to access government financial support during COVID-19 due to their uncertainty about eligibility or because they did not feel the need to apply. Others faced challenges using government services, including limited information, language barriers, long waits for essential documents, inadequate financial support, concerns about repayment, service quality lacking cultural sensitivity, and an absence of in-person assistance.

Study 2: Post-Pandemic Experiences and Support Systems

Individual Contexts

Study 2 participants reported long-lasting health impacts from COVID-19 infections and public health measures, which continued into the post-pandemic period:

- **Mental health concerns:** Many participants faced long-lasting psychological challenges from pandemic-related circumstances. Extended time at home caused feelings of being “stuck,” worry for loved ones, and persistent stress. Isolation contributed to weight changes, negative body images, low motivation, depression, fatigue, and difficulty readjusting after reopening. Even post-pandemic, participants felt vulnerable, on “high alert,” and uncertain about the future, reporting trauma, lowered self-confidence, self-blame, emotional numbness, and intensified anxiety, stress, and depression, alongside feelings of loss, neglect, and struggles with self-care and sense of self.
- **Physical health concerns:** Many participants reported lasting physical health challenges after the pandemic. These included side effects from COVID-19 infection and vaccines, as well as issues caused by pandemic measures like masking, social distancing, and staying indoors. Common problems included skin reactions, dry skin, increased allergies, and acne. Participants also described cognitive difficulties, such as trouble organizing their thoughts and memory problems, sometimes following a COVID-19 infection or COVID-like symptoms.

To cope with ongoing health challenges after the pandemic, participants practiced self-reflection and long-term healthier habits, as well as showed resilience in everyday situations.

- **Self-reflection:** Several participants saw COVID-19 as a major life event with long-term personal and social consequences. Some shared how it made recovery and coping harder, especially when dealing with inequality, while others found positive outcomes—like valuing their health, independence, and personal growth. The pandemic also encouraged people to focus on living in the present and strengthening their social connections to better face future challenges.
- **Adopting long-term healthier habits:** After the pandemic, many participants kept up the health habits they had adopted to avoid COVID-19. These included staying home when sick, keeping distance from people with symptoms, wearing masks, using hand sanitizer, and practicing good hygiene—often seen as long-term lifestyle changes.

- **Resilience:** After the pandemic, many participants showed resilience by prioritizing their mental health, staying hopeful, and embracing a more optimistic outlook. They described relying on faith, letting go of past grudges, living in the moment, and moving forward. People also took practical steps to support their well-being, such as learning new skills, finishing long-postponed tasks, limiting negative media consumption, spending time outdoors, and connecting more with others.

Along with experiencing and coping with long-lasting health impacts of the pandemic, participants' post-pandemic experiences also included lifestyle changes and shifts in perspectives.

- **Post-pandemic lifestyle changes:** Many participants experienced major lifestyle shifts shaped by lockdowns, distancing, and fear of COVID-19. Most became more comfortable spending time alone and leaned toward a quieter, more introverted lifestyle, sometimes finding social interactions more difficult. However, some reported the opposite—improving their social skills, health, and overall quality of life.
- **Post-pandemic perspective changes:** Beyond lifestyle shifts, participants described lasting changes in how they viewed life. These included slowing down, seeking stability, exploring flexible career paths, prioritizing work-life balance, and openly addressing mental health.

Interpersonal Contexts

In the post-pandemic period, participants described mixed experiences in their relationships. Some families grew closer, while others faced strain and conflict. Mothers highlighted both challenges and opportunities in supporting their children's recovery, and friendships ranged from becoming stronger to breaking apart.

- **Continuity of stronger family bonds:** Many participants described the continued strengthening of post-pandemic family relationships through support, reunions, and reconciliations. Reunions through family visiting Canada after travel restrictions were lifted, or participants visiting family members in their home countries, as well as ongoing support through regular communication increased their appreciation of family ties. In some cases, this process enabled the mending of previously strained relationships in the post-pandemic context.
- **Strained family relationships:** Some participants reported long-lasting family tensions after the pandemic. These challenges originated from clashing opinions, loss of loved ones, limited opportunities to visit family back home, generational gaps, and marital conflict or abuse. For some, these tensions led to separation or divorce, while others experienced emotional distance from children, parents, or family members in their home countries.
- **Mothers' caregiving in children's post-pandemic recovery:** Many mothers of children under 18 were the primary caregivers after the pandemic. They were deeply affected by their children's post-pandemic challenges—ranging from anxiety, depression, and heightened emotional distress to reduced motivation, social skills, and physical activity, as well as increased internet use after long periods at home during the pandemic. Limited school communication during and after lockdown also raised concerns about hygiene

habits, literacy, and academic progress. To support their children, mothers encouraged time in nature, helped with schoolwork, and fostered independence.

- **Strengthened or broken friendships:** Some participants placed greater value on friendships, reconnecting with close friends in Canada and their home countries through visits and social media. These connections often provided emotional support and improved mental health, with some even forming new friendships that had a positive impact. However, not all experiences were positive—some participants felt their friendships had grown weaker, leaving them distant or uncomfortable with friends. Limited interaction and unresolved conflicts, often linked to pandemic restrictions, led some friendships to gradually fade away.

Economic (Institutional) Contexts

Participants faced a mix of economic challenges and opportunities in the post-pandemic period. Remote platforms and post-pandemic economic recovery created new job and education possibilities. However, many dealt with long-term unemployment, financial insecurity, and difficulties working effectively through online platforms.

- **Employment and educational opportunities:** As Canada's economy gradually recovered, some participants rebuilt their careers by securing new jobs, reviving businesses, and gaining financial independence, while also taking advantage of professional development opportunities through training and formal education.
- **Long-term unemployment and financial difficulties:** Many participants faced unemployment, unstable jobs, and financial difficulties. Contributing factors included the shift to remote work, COVID-related (vaccination) policies, temporary job arrangements, immigration policies that excluded temporary migrants, and business uncertainties resulting from the pandemic recession. These challenges were worsened by financial difficulties due to reduced income, rising costs, limited family support, and the responsibility of financially supporting relatives both in Canada and in their home countries.
- **Work opportunities and challenges due to remote platforms:** Many participants appreciated the benefits of remote platforms, including greater flexibility, networking and learning opportunities, environmental sustainability, and improved work-life balance—especially for mothers of children under 18. However, some participants emphasized the continued value of in-person interactions, noting challenges with remote work such as distractions, less control over schedules, and difficulties with academic performance without in-class experiences.

Healthcare (Institutional) Contexts

Many participants faced personal and structural barriers to accessing healthcare after the pandemic.

- **Personal barriers to healthcare:** Some participants faced individual challenges such as mental health stigma and doubts about the effectiveness of counselling or medications.
- **Structural barriers to healthcare:** Many participants encountered systemic obstacles, including long wait times, language barriers and limited awareness of interpretation services, insufficient guidance for newcomers navigating the healthcare system, reduced

access to virtual appointments, high costs, and limited availability of in-person mental health services.

Community Contexts

Participants reported both positive and challenging impacts. On the positive side, many reconnected with their communities and felt a stronger sense of belonging. Challenges included limited community support due to structural and digital barriers, as well as social dynamics affected by inequalities and pandemic-related narratives.

- **Reconnection with communities and stronger sense of belonging:** Many participants deepened the social and community networks they formed during COVID-19 by attending events, volunteering, taking leadership roles, and supporting others. For newcomers, these connections were especially important, helping them overcome pandemic-specific isolation, integrate into Canadian society, and access essential settlement support as the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.
- **Structural and digital barriers to accessing community support:** Many participants faced challenges accessing community services after the pandemic. Structural issues included limited awareness of available programs and a mismatch between services offered and individual needs. These challenges were worsened by the shift to online platforms, which conflicted with some participants' preference for in-person interactions and made accessing community resources more difficult.
- **Social dynamics influenced by inequalities:** Some participants faced ongoing inequalities linked to immigrant status, nationality, race, and social class, which often led to feelings of unsafety or dismissal. Reports included experiences of anti-immigrant bias, racism, and microaggressions. Participants also noticed an increase in socially distant behaviors, which they attributed to the extended isolation during the pandemic.

Recommendations for Strengthening Support Systems

Participants across both Studies 1 and 2 offered practical recommendations to improve support for immigrant women during pandemic recovery and future crises. These suggestions were directed at community, economic, and settlement organizations, healthcare providers, and all levels of government.

Community, Economic, and Settlement Support.

- **Community Building:** Promote reconnection through both online and in-person activities, such as social events, support groups, and family programs. Offer digital training and incentives to encourage participation.
- **Inclusive, Intersectional Services:** Provide flexible and accessible programs—available online and in-person—in multiple immigrant languages. Tailor services to the needs of racialized, religious, linguistic, queer, and rural women, as well as mothers, divorcees, and survivors of abuse. Increase outreach efforts to make sure these groups are included.
- **Economic Stability and Empowerment:** Expand financial support, employment opportunities, and economic programs for immigrant women. Priorities include financial literacy training, job application support, credential recognition, affordable higher education, and tailored support for women interested in entrepreneurship.

- **Better Service Access:** Improve communication about available services through clear, translated, and targeted information. Strengthen collaboration between governments and organizations, and expand outreach methods such as flyers at arrival points, workshops, community champions, online databases, and mobile apps.

Healthcare.

- **Affordable and Accessible Care:** Ensure timely, affordable, and culturally responsive healthcare. Expand interpretation services and provide information on post-pandemic health concerns affecting women.
- **Inclusive Mental Health Support:** Increase access to affordable counseling, immigrant-specific helplines, and trauma-informed, gender-sensitive care. Services should be delivered by professionals trained in equity, diversity, and inclusion, ideally sharing cultural and linguistic backgrounds with clients. Expand awareness campaigns so women know what services are available.

Government Policy.

- **Financial Assistance Eligibility:** Expand crisis-related financial aid to include everyone in Canada, regardless of employment status, to better support newcomers and the unemployed.
- **Funding for Community Engagement:** Increase government funding for local community activities and programs that support immigrant women.
- **Crisis Preparedness:** Strengthen readiness for future crises through faster response systems, reliable access to healthcare staff and medicines, domestic PPE production, inflation control measures, and clear, transparent government communication.

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