

Preliminary Analysis of Qualitative Interviews

During September 2020, 16 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with women members and staff of the Chelsea Collaborative. Interviews were carried out on the phone and in-person during the days of the food pantry.

The goal of the interviews was to better understand the impact and response of COVID-19 on women's lives. Women ranged from mid-twenties to mid-sixties in age and all interviews were conducted in Spanish. Preliminary themes are identified below:

A. The Impact of COVID-19: *"We all lost our jobs and couldn't send money back home"*

1. **The pandemic was unexpected:** Women mentioned we were caught off guard and no one was prepared for this situation. The emotional shock of March as a symbol of "the end of times" is still salient in their discourse about the story of the pandemic.
2. **Listening to the news is very stressful, yet informative:** Women mentioned that keeping up with the news increased their anxiety and concern, some stated they had stopped listening to the news to protect their mental health. However, they mentioned that they learned how to protect themselves from COVID-19 through news sources. Many stated the impact of the number of dead was profound and they felt terrible sadness for all the families that lost people. Women described being part of a collective sadness and despair.
3. **High unemployment:** Most women interviewed (and their family members) lost their jobs because of COVID-19. Some have started working again, and others have not. The economic shock of sudden mass unemployment was brutal, and women described having a hard time sleeping, getting out of bed, and were constantly stressed about how to provide for their families. Those who have not have a much more negative outlook on their capacity to adapt to COVID and feel more depressed and unsettled about everything.
4. **Confusion about government assistance programs:** Many of the participants had applied for government assistance, such as RAFT, but were confused about the process of application and why they were denied assistance. Some did not know how to request unemployment assistance and other benefits. There was a sense that despite offers and statements of assistance, applications do not get a response, and assistance does not actually come through.
5. **Added stress of not being able to send remittances:** Many of the participants regularly sent money to Central American countries to support their families. Due to their current unemployment, they have not been able to send money and are sad and extremely concerned about their families' wellbeing. They mentioned that most Central

American countries are not providing support to families during COVID and they feel additional pressure to support their families.

B. Resilience and Survival: “Because of God and the Children”

- 1. Family and social networks are essential:** Women have survived emotionally, financially, and logistically because of their family and social networks. This involves sharing food, childcare, generating informal jobs and financial exchanges, and taking care of each other when family members were sick.
- 2. Families are more united:** Women talked about becoming much closer to their families because of the time spent together and due to hard conversations. Women with partners talked about feeling incredibly supported emotionally by their partners and relying on their mutual strength to get through the hard times as a family. No women described increases in violence or substance use, on the contrary, they felt much closer in their intimate relationships.
- 3. Religion and God have played a critical role:** Most women talked about their faith as being a cornerstone of their capacity to survive the hardships. Women talked about families getting closer to God and prayed together daily. Zoom prayer circles were established through church groups and even with relatives in Central America. One woman described a Zoom rosary prayer circle that included individuals from a Central American country and her family in the US that kept her husband alive while he was in intensive care with COVID-19. Many women stated that “only God knows what he is doing”. There is a general sense that this pandemic is part of a higher plan and therefore trusting God will ensure everything will be alright in the end.
- 4. Hard times are overcome because of the children:** Women who have children said they got through this “because of the children”. Even if they were depressed and could barely get out of bed, they would get through the day to protect their children and make sure they were fed and taken care of. Women described children adapting patiently to COVID, even though initially they may have been confused about why they couldn’t go out or couldn’t go to school or see their friends.
- 5. Families and friends share food:** Women described sharing food and resources with others less fortunate than themselves. For example, if women got a box of food from the food pantry, they would give items to another mother who lived in the building who they perceived needed help. Families and friends lent each other money to pay rent to avoid eviction. Women cooked for each other when a family member was sick and left food at the doorstep.
- 6. Women began small new “businesses”:** Some women began new informal businesses to generate some income. Some women began cooking and making food to deliver to friends, while others provided childcare for friends who remained employed. A grassroots economy is emerging out of the immediate need to generate income and enable certain services for the community.
- 7. This will end:** Most women stated that “this will end”, but have no idea when. They know it will not end this fall and most anticipate that winter will be hard, with few new

jobs, while savings have run out. Jehova's Witnesses stated that this will end with the second coming of Christ and that this is part of the plan that is outlined in the Bible.

C. Trust in the larger community: *"I think they did a good job"*

- 1. Assistance guaranteed survival:** Almost all the women stated that both the Government of Chelsea and the Collaborative had done an excellent job supporting the community to survive the pandemic. Most had no complaints and often compared the response in Chelsea to Central American countries where very little support was provided and stated feeling blessed and lucky for all the help.
- 2. Food Pantries were essential:** Women were clear in stating that they would have gone hungry without the Chelsea Collaborative food pantry and other food assistance programs. As stated above, not only was the food essential for their survival, but they also distributed at their micro-level- to a single mother who lives downstairs, to an elderly lady who can barely walk, to a family who was recovering from COVID. Participants expressed tremendous gratitude for food assistance.