

# **Living with Dignity:**

Lived Experiences of Latina Immigrant  
Survivors



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## Authorship Note

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This report is a collective construction of knowledge in which we articulate the wisdom of a group of survivors of gender-based violence from a community-based organization based on their own experiences along with the methodological knowledge of an academic research team.

It is our intention to recognize the capacity and profound power of community-based groups' knowledge creation, as well as to highlight our commitment to investigations that are not extractive of the wisdom of communities from the global majority through participatory research methods.

Our collaboration is between Madre Tierra, a Latinx community-based organization that provides supportive services to survivors of gender-based violence in Virginia, Maryland, and Washington DC, and the Linguistic Justice Division within the Research Consortium on Gender-based Violence at Michigan State University.

Below, we only name those who are part of the academic research team in order to protect the confidentiality of the Latina immigrant survivors that were part of this project. The names appear in no particular order.

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## Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a widespread and injurious issue worldwide (Fleming et al., 2015). IPV includes acts of physical violence, sexual abuse, threats and intimidation, stalking, harassment, isolation, economic abuse, and verbal abuse (Breiding et al., 2014). In the United States, more than 12 million adults experience IPV each year (Sumner et al., 2015). Although IPV impacts everyone, in the United States, women between 18 to 34 years of age experience the highest rates of violence (Black et al., 2011). Those who have been victimized are at an increased risk for physical and emotional health problems (Lacey et al., 2013; Stubbs & Szoeki, 2021). IPV may also have a profound economic impact on survivors' lives, often leading to a wide range of negative financial outcomes (Adams et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2017) that are barriers to leaving an abusive partner (Amanor-Boadu et al., 2012).

IPV is also one of the greatest risk factors for women's housing instability and homelessness (Baker et al., 2010; Chan et al., 2021; Pavao et al., 2007). The interrelationship between IPV and housing instability is often complex. It may involve an abusive partner sabotaging survivors' housing by destroying property, failing to pay rent, or interfering with their victim's work in order to damage their finances (Adams et al., 2020). It may also involve continued physical abuse, stalking and/or harassment, forcing survivors to move (Baker et al., 2003). Additionally, the trauma of experiencing ongoing abuse may have a deleterious impact on survivors' mental health, making it difficult to manage post-traumatic stress symptoms that often have a negative impact on daily activities, including paying bills and maintaining a job (Lacey et al., 2013). These multifaceted and far-reaching effects of IPV underscore the importance of sustainable and accessible support systems for ensuring the well-being of survivors (Baker et al., 2010).

In the past couple of years, COVID-19 has increased the risk and impact of IPV, especially among communities of color disproportionately affected by various pandemic-related stressors, such as loss of jobs and income, limited social connection and isolation, health problems, and illness, among other factors (Boserup et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2021). In addition to a significant increase in IPV rates, the access gap to available resources for survivors of color has widened due to the pandemic (Evans et al., 2020). The racial and ethnic disparities further exacerbated by the pandemic emphasize the need to find better ways to support these communities through culturally-responsive resources and interventions (Pokharel et al., 2021; Valdovinos et al., 2021).

Latina immigrant women, in particular, are at an increased risk for IPV. It is estimated that more than one in three women in this community has experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives (Smith et al., 2017). Despite these high numbers, Latina immigrant women continue to experience disparate access to services (Cleaveland & Waslin, 2021; Sabri et al., 2020). However, Latina immigrant survivors often experience increased housing difficulties due to the multitude of institutional barriers that burden immigrant communities in the US, including poverty, unmet language needs, housing discrimination, social isolation, and lengthy legal processes (Adams et al., 2021).

There is scarce literature on the housing needs and experiences of IPV survivors, particularly Latina immigrants. Further, the limited existing literature is typically centered on survivors' housing barriers and the impact of housing insecurity on survivors' well-being (Adams et al., 2021). A clear gap in the literature refers to survivors' housing experiences and how those impact their definitions of safe and stable housing. Considering that safe and stable housing is one of the most pressing needs among Latina immigrant survivors, it is vital to ensure that housing interventions for this population are aligned with how survivors themselves define safety and stability.

This report describes the findings of a research study that aimed to: (1) better understand how Latina immigrant IPV survivors define safe and stable housing; (2) document Latina survivors' lived experiences of searching and obtaining housing, including strategies implemented to avoid homelessness; and (3) explore survivors' recommendations to improve supportive services for this population that may inform policy and practice.

## **IPV and Housing Instability among Latina Immigrant Survivors**

The relationship between IPV and housing instability is widely documented (Baker et al., 2010). Survivors frequently experience housing instability after separating from their abusive partners. Housing instability can include limited credit, frequent unwanted or unplanned moves, inability to cover rent and pay essential bills (e.g., food, electricity, water), having to stay with friends or family (including “couchsurfing”) for limited periods of time, and/or experiencing frequent eviction threats (Baker et al., 2010). Some factors that contribute to survivors' housing instability include, but are not limited to, low income, the lack of affordable housing, housing discrimination, credit problems, criminal history, and ongoing stalking (Adams et al., 2021).

This well-established relationship between housing instability and homelessness should not be ignored. Housing instability is frequently a precursor to homelessness (Baker et al., 2010). This complex and indirect relationship is seen at both individual and systemic levels. At the individual level, limited social support and job loss contribute to housing instability, while increasing rental prices, limited available resources, and the COVID-19 pandemic are some systemic factors that may also profoundly impact survivors' housing instability (Adams et al., 2021; Sabri et al., 2020). As such, it is critical to consider all interrelated factors that impact survivors' ability to obtain and maintain their housing.

Although Latina women are underrepresented in IPV research, they are significantly affected by this phenomenon. Among women who have experienced gender-based violence, Latina women report the highest levels of psychological distress, as well as poor physical health (Stockman et al., 2015). Further, Latina women are at the highest risk for intimate partner homicide (Petrosky et al., 2017; Swatt & Sabina, 2013). While some research suggests that Latina women experience violence at a lower rate when compared to other communities (Alvarez & Fedock, 2016), this finding could be due to Latina women being less likely to report victimization compared to non-Latina women (Ingram, 2007). These differences are even starker when examining immigration status, as Latina immigrants are even less likely to report abuse due to fear of deportation or other legal repercussions (Ingram, 2007).

Among Latina women in the US, Latina immigrant women are at an increased risk of experiencing IPV and its deleterious impact when compared to naturalized survivors (Hass et al., 2000). Immigrant survivors' legal status and documentation may increase their risk for further abuse and isolation due to a wide array of immigration related abuse and challenges in accessing supportive services (Fuchsel & Brummett, 2021). Immigration related abuse may include threats to withhold immigration petitions, the use of immigration systems and the police to threaten survivors' current legal status, and threats of revealing survivors' undocumented status as a coercion and control tactic (Amanor-Boadu et al., 2012; Erez et al., 2009). Often Latina immigrant survivors are isolated and experience multiple barriers to accessing supportive services, including a wide gap in knowledge of available services and legal protections offered to survivors and limited access to culturally and contextually grounded supportive services (Zadnik, et al., 2016).

## Language Justice and Culturally Responsive Services for Latina Survivors

Supportive services are critical to helping survivors stay safe, and improve their health and wellbeing (Sullivan, 2018). Supportive services may also provide survivors with increased social support and may help reduce further victimization (Alvarez & Fedock, 2016). However, research has found that Latina immigrant women are less likely to seek services from formal support systems due to significant barriers to accessing aid and supportive services. Some of the barriers Latina immigrant survivors face include a lack of available services grounded in language access and justice that consider survivors' cultural backgrounds and contextual realities (Alvarez, et al., 2016; Reina & Lohman, 2015; Zadnik et al., 2016).

Language is closely tied to an individual's history, culture, and identity (Antena Aire, 2020). Thus, language is central to providing culturally responsive supportive services (American Psychological Association, 2012), particularly when working with immigrant IPV survivors. It is important to note the difference between language access and language justice. Language access is necessary to protect survivors from further victimization. It typically refers to providing individuals with materials in their preferred language. Language justice, however, goes beyond language access as it refers to the fundamental belief that every individual has the right to communicate, understand, and be understood in the language they feel most articulate and powerful (Antena Aire, 2020).

A language justice framework is key to establishing safety, promoting healing, and addressing survivors' unique needs (Hurtado et al., 2020; López-Zerón et al., 2021). Direct service providers and researchers working with Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant survivors must assess their procedures to ensure that they are adequately centering survivors' culture, context, and language. Although there are direct service practitioners and researchers committed to trauma-informed, culturally responsive work grounded on language justice (Hurtado et al., 2020; López-Zerón et al., 2021), the need to increase the access to culturally responsive services grounded in language justice remains.

A language justice approach is also indispensable to fully understand immigrant survivors' housing experiences, as well as identifying their housing needs and goals. In keeping with these considerations, this project was designed and implemented in close collaboration between key community partners and a team of Latinx Spanish-speaking bilingual and bicultural researchers. All procedures were conducted in Spanish, including the data collection, analysis, interpretation, and drafting of this report.

### The Current Study

The main objective of this research study was to learn about the housing experiences of Latina immigrant IPV survivors. Participants identified stability as a key component to safe housing and provided practical examples of what this means to them. They also described the significant barriers they have faced as they seek to obtain and maintain safe housing. Finally, participants discussed their housing needs and goals. In the following sections, we describe this research study's main findings and include recommendations for improving support services and interventions for Latina immigrant survivors.

## Objectives and Methodology

Using a qualitative exploratory method and thematic analysis, this research study provides empirical evidence regarding the needs and experiences of Latina immigrant IPV survivors as they seek to obtain safe and stable housing in the United States. Table 1 below outlines the main objectives of the study and their corresponding research questions.

**Table 1.** Main Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objectives	Research Questions
Understand Latina immigrant survivors' lived experiences when seeking and obtaining housing in the US	What are the lived experiences of Latina immigrant survivors in their search for housing in the US?  What strategies have they used to avoid being homeless?
Understand how Latina immigrant survivors define safe and stable housing	How do Latina immigrant survivors define having safe and stable housing?
Develop recommendations for direct service providers, funders, and technical assistance providers to improve existing supportive services for Latina immigrant survivors	What supportive services have been most helpful?  What suggestions do participants have for organizations that provide housing services for Latina immigrant survivors?

The research team collaborated with a community-based organization located in the northeast of the country that provides supportive services to IPV survivors in designing and implementing this investigation. All study procedures were conducted in Spanish, which is the preferred language of everyone involved in this project.

The leadership of the community-based organization initially identified eligible survivors for this study to include: (1) IPV survivors and (2) immigrants from a Latin American country. They invited 20 eligible women to learn more about the opportunity to participate in this study and set up a virtual meeting with the principal investigator to meet her and hear more about the research objectives. At the end of the meeting, survivors interested in participating gave researchers permission to contact them via phone to confirm their interest, answer any questions about their possible participation, and coordinate focus group or interview times.

The research team received the contact information of 15 women interested in participating in the study. The researchers successfully contacted all but one of the potential participants. During the phone calls, the principal investigator confirmed that each person was still interested in participating and scheduled four focus groups of three to four participants, depending on survivors' availability. To accommodate participants' availability, the research team decided to also conduct individual interviews with those who were unable to attend the scheduled focus group. In total, eight survivors participated in



one of three focus groups and six in individual interviews (n=14). All focus groups and interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Michigan State University reviewed and approved the procedures for this research study. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants in this study, survivors gave their verbal consent to participate in the study and to allow the audio recording of the interview/focus group. All participants were compensated for their time and contribution. Parents were reimbursed for childcare needs.

## Participants

All study participants were immigrant women from a Latin American country. Overall, participants were between 31 and 50 years old, and on average, they were 40 years old. Most participants (71%) had emigrated from Mexico, while the rest were from Guatemala, El Salvador and Bolivia. On average, participants had lived in the US for 17 years. All participants were employed at the time of the interview/discussion group. 86% of participants were employed full-time. Of those, four participants reported having an additional part-time job to cover their expenses. The remainder (two survivors) reported being employed part-time due to layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic and hoped to find full-time employment soon. Although 71% of participants had children, only 57% were still raising children under 18 years of age.

## Data Analysis

The research team consisted of a group of seven first and second-generation Latinx researchers. The team first transcribed the audio from the focus groups and individual interviews. After the transcriptions were reviewed and finalized, the team carefully read all the documents, keeping track of emerging themes, connections between interviews, and personal reactions as a way to become increasingly familiar with the data. Following a thematic analysis of the data, the researchers coded the data based on the ideas expressed by the participants. All qualitative analytic procedures were conducted using Dedoose Version 9.0.44. Initial codes were organized into themes according to the three main objectives of this study.

## Research Findings

### **Objective 1: Understand Latina immigrant survivors' lived experiences when seeking and obtaining housing in the US**

The first objective of this study aimed to document participants' housing experiences and create a space for survivors to share their needs in order to improve the housing support services offered to Latina immigrant survivors. In discussing a multitude of lived experiences with housing in the US, participants detailed instances of (1) living in unsanitary and unsafe spaces, (2) landlord abuse, (3) the impact these experiences have had on their wellbeing and their children's wellbeing, and (4) discrimination and language barriers they faced trying to obtain and/or maintain their housing.

## Unsanitary and Unsafe Spaces

Participants in this study shared **numerous challenging experiences** in their search for housing in the US, particularly after the impact of having experienced violence, as mentioned by one participant (P501):

- Pero en este país, uno como madre soltera, más siendo víctima de violencia doméstica, uno sufre mucho... **en lo que una más sufre es en la vivienda.**
- *But in this country, as a single mother, on top of being a victim of domestic violence, one suffers a lot... **where we suffer the most is with housing.***

All participants mentioned recently renting at least one **unregulated basement** that put their safety - both physical and emotional - at risk because of the uninhabitable living conditions found in these spaces. Some survivors described basements with holes in the walls that let animals, garbage, and other elements of nature into their homes. One participant (P301) explained:

- Yo renté un basement en que la primera noche que llegué después de meter todas mis cosas adentro de ese basement, llovió y **la primera noche el agua entraba como cataratas por la ventana.**
- *I rented a basement in which on my first night there, after putting all my things in that basement, it rained and **on that first night, water came in like a waterfall through the window.***

Further, some of these **basements do not have adequate ventilation**, which causes a lot of humidity, putting the **health of the survivors and their children at risk**. (P201):

- Yo renté un cuarto en un basement para mi hija y yo, y no estaba acondicionada para vivir porque **no tenía lo que era el aire caliente o el aire frío, entonces allí se llenaba de humedad.** Y allí había que poner una maquina que jalaba la humedad... Y eso es malo para los pulmones.
- *I rented a room in a basement for my daughter and I, and it wasn't equipped to live in because **it didn't have hot or cold air, so it filled up with humidity.** And you had to put in a little machine that removed the humidity... And that's bad for the lungs.*

Participants have also experienced **unsanitary conditions** in apartment buildings. A participant (P701) described her experience moving into an apartment after her shelter stay. A few days after moving in, she realized the apartment was **plagued with bedbugs**. The property managers did not take responsibility for the bedbug infestation. The participant decided to leave and, as a result, lost her deposit and most of her furniture. As she shared, she emphasized the impact of that experience on her family's physical and mental health:

- **Eso de las chinches es horrible** porque uno se despierta a media noche. Se le están metiendo por los oídos, los niños todos picados...eso es una plaga tan horrible... **Entonces yo quedé como bien traumada de ese apartamento. Y mis niños [también]** – las ronchas, esa picazón, sobre todo el pequeño porque él casi no entiende, los otros pues se controlaban a rascarse, pero mi niño hasta se desangraba donde le picaban las chinches.

*The bed bug thing is horrible because you wake up in the middle of the night. They are getting into your ears, the children are all bitten... they are such horrible pests... **So I was traumatized by that apartment. And my children [as well]** – the welts, the itching, especially the little one because he hardly understood, the others were able to control their scratching, but my little one scratched the bedbug bites until he bled.*

Participants also described many experiences of **insecurity** when renting basements and apartments. A survivor (P301) recounted that after having paid the deposit and the first month's rent, she realized that the front door with access to the outside of the house did not have a lock:

● Después de que entré a vivir allí, me di cuenta de que la puerta no tenía chapa, no cerraba, se quedaba abierta día y noche. Yo pedí que le pusiera chapa porque había acceso por la calle a esa puerta y me dijeron que no alcanzaba el dinero para ponerla, que la pondrían el mes que sigue...**y viví así un mes, con la puerta abierta.**

● *After I moved there, I realized that the door didn't have a lock, it didn't close, it stayed open day and night. I asked for a lock to be installed because the door could be accessed from the street, and they told me that there was not enough money for a lock, that they would install it the following month...**and I lived like that for a month, with the door unlocked.***

In many instances, survivors have had to live in **overcrowded spaces with strangers** in order to afford housing costs which has risked their safety and the safety of their children. Several participants agreed that when sharing housing with several other people, particularly strangers, they do not have the privacy they would like for their families. One participant (P302) reflected on her experience:

● Era un apartamento donde vivían unos 8 o 9 hombres, y nosotras 2 de mujeres y yo traía 2 niños - la niña que tenía 5 años y el niño que tenía 2 añitos. Entonces lo que era viernes en la tarde que [los hombres] llegaban de trabajar, solo era tomar y tomar... la verdad yo no me sentía segura, ni yo, ni para mis hijos. **Entonces lo que yo hacía era irme y me encerraba en el cuarto con mis hijos... nunca me sentía segura.**

● *It was an apartment where 8 or 9 men lived, plus us 2 women, I had 2 children with me – the girl who was 5 years old and the boy who was only 2. So, on Friday evenings they [the men] came home from work, and all they did was drink and drink...truth be told, I didn't feel safe, not for myself nor for my children. **So, what I used to do was leave and lock myself up in the room with my children...I never felt safe.***

For other survivors, sharing housing with strangers has been a terrifying experience. After sharing a house with another immigrant for about 4 years, one participant discovered that her roommate had **installed a camera in the house to observe her without her consent**. She (P102) shared:

● Yo tenía [de inquilino] a un muchacho en la casa...Él me llamó hace como dos meses para saludarme... Y me di cuenta de que estaba bien tomado ... **Y estaba tan tomado que después me dijo, que él había puesto una cámara en la casa y que todo el tiempo me miraba.**

● *I had a young man in the house [as a tenant]... He called me about two months ago to say hello... And I realized that he was very drunk... **And he was so drunk that later he told me he had installed a camera in the house and watched me all the time.***

## Landlord Abuse

Participants' rental experiences are not only characterized by the various difficulties with the physical space but are also notable for the multiple instances of landlord abuse. **Some landlords arbitrarily control their utilities**, as one participant (P202) explained:

...yo no me sentía contenta allí porque la señora [arrendadora] **cuando nosotras estábamos, ella apagaba el aire, y nomás salíamos y ella prendía el aire como que ella trataba de ahorrar**. Entonces yo no me sentía segura porque... lo primero que uno debe de tener en tiempo de calor es [el aire acondicionado] porque los niños se pueden deshidratar.

*...I didn't feel happy there because when we were home, the lady [landlady] **turned off the air, and as soon as we went out she turned the air back on, it seemed she was trying to save money**. So I didn't feel safe because... the first thing you should have in hot weather is [air conditioning] because children can become dehydrated.*

In other instances, landlords **threaten evictions and legal proceedings** if participants fail to pay arbitrary and unexpected rent increases or if they don't give several months' notice before moving out. A participant (P203) who had lived in her apartment for more than seven years shared her experience with a new landlord. The landlord raised her rent several times in a single year. The cost of the apartment was becoming unaffordable for her family, so the survivor began looking for other housing options. However, before she could give notice, the landlord informed her that he had already renewed her contract for the following year:

En menos de 2 años, me han subido \$300 dólares la renta. Luego, el mes pasado [el arrendador] me dijo, 'este mes, la renta te va a subir.' Entonces yo quedé en avisarle. Cuando yo le iba a dar la respuesta, él me dijo, 'oh, ya te hice el contrato.' '¿Cómo me lo va a hacer si yo no la he firmado? No le he dicho que sí.' **Ahora ya tengo un contrato por otro año, el cual yo no he firmado. Pero, él ya me dijo que ya lo tengo. Entonces ahora no sé qué voy a hacer...**

*In less than 2 years, they have raised my rent \$300. Then, last month [the landlord] told me, 'this month, your rent is going to go up.' So I said I'd let him know. When I was going to give him my response, he told me, 'oh, I already wrote up your lease.' 'How can you do that when I haven't even signed it? I haven't agreed to that.' **Now I have a lease for another year, which I didn't sign. But, he told me that I already have it. So now I don't know what to do...***

Another landlord **threatened to call the police and report a survivor's undocumented status** in order to avoid reimbursing her deposit, as previously agreed. The participant (P701) shared:

Entonces al ver mi insistencia de... que me regresara mi dinero, me dijo que yo estaba recién venida, y que yo no era legal aquí, y que me iba a echar la policía, y **que si le llamaba a la policía me iban a arrestar y me iban a deportar, y que mi niño iba a quedarse aquí en un hogar...** que si yo era inteligente entonces que yo dejara las cosas así.

*So when I insisted that he give me my money back, he told me that I was a new arrival, and that I was not legal here, and that he was going to call the police on me, and **that if he called the police they would arrest me and they would deport me, and that my little boy would end up in a [foster] home here...** that if I was smart then I should leave things alone.*

In some instances, **landlords make it difficult for women to leave** their apartment buildings by threatening them with legal proceedings. One survivor (P101) described her experience when she tried to move to a better apartment:

● Estábamos buscando otro apartamento y cuando fuimos a la oficina a decir que nos íbamos a ir, nos dijeron que no podíamos irnos porque no avisé tres meses antes. **Pero nosotros avisamos cuatro meses antes que nos íbamos, e incluso, hicimos 2 meses sin contrato porque nos íbamos a mover.**

● *We were looking for another apartment and when we went to the office to say we were going to leave, they told us we couldn't leave because we didn't give three months' notice. **But we gave four months' notice before leaving, and we even paid month to month for 2 months because we were going to move.***

Although the participant identified **this instance as a clear form of abuse, she decided to stay** to avoid legal proceedings:

● ...Y bueno, nos hicieron un problemón, y nos dijeron que nos iban a mandar a la corte. **Para evitar todo eso, pues, decidimos decir allá que ya no nos íbamos a ir. Claro, con aquello se perdió el dinero que dimos, y pues tuvimos que renovar nuevamente acá.**

● *...And well, they turned it into a huge issue, and told us they were going to send us to court. **To avoid all that, well, we decided to let the other place know that we were not going to move after all. Of course, we lost the deposit we had given and, well, we had to renew the lease here.***

In other cases, landlords make housing decisions without providing prior notice to their tenants, which has severely impacted participants' lives. One participant learned that the house in which she rented the basement had been **repossessed by the bank** when she got home from work one day and found padlocks on all entrances. Despite having paid rent on time for over 4 years, the participant and her children lost the vast majority of their belongings. She (P302) detailed her experience:

● Ella (la arrendadora) me dio un número de cuenta donde yo le depositaba la renta mensualmente, pero ella no estaba pagando la casa... **Y yo creyendo que yo tenía una vivienda segura donde vivir con mis hijos y no fue así.** El señor [del banco] solo me dijo 'tiene una hora para sacar las cosas más importantes que usted tenga'... **no nos dieron chance de sacar nada porque la señora no pagaba la casa.**

● *She (the landlady) gave me a bank account number where I deposited the rent each month, but she wasn't paying for the house... **I believed I had a safe place to live with my children, but it wasn't like that.** The man [from the bank] only told me 'you have one hour to get the most important things you have'... **they didn't give us a chance to take anything else because the lady had not made payments on the house.***

When survivors do not receive a favorable response from landlords to repair their rental units, some survivors **invest their own money to make necessary repairs**. A participant who invested her money in repairing the basement she rented found out that the house was for sale just a few weeks after she had finished fixing it up. Reflecting on the difficulties of obtaining stable housing, she (P102) shared:

**Mientras no tenga mi lugar no voy a estar estable...** Me puse a invertir en el cuarto de mis hijos. Hasta le puse piso de verdad y gasté \$700. Y casi como a los 15 días nos va diciendo que la estaba vendiendo. Cuando él sabía que yo iba hacer ese proyecto... Me hubiera avisado. Puse una puerta allí nueva... Pinté yo todo el basement. Y él lo vendió, así, como si nada...

**As long as I don't have my own place, I will not be stable...** I invested in my children's room. I even put a real floor in and spent \$700. And almost 15 days later, he [the landlord] tells us that he was selling it. He knew that I was going ahead with that project... If only he had let me know. I put in a new door... I painted the whole basement. And he sold it, just like that...

As participants assessed their housing experiences, many shared that despite paying rent, they did not consider their housing situation stable. Participants worry about the **possibility of a sudden eviction or an unexpected rent increase** that would leave them homeless without prior notice, as one survivor explained (P102):

Porque si supiera que es mi casa... yo sé que mientras que no la deje de pagar, yo puedo seguir viviendo allí. Mas sin embargo, **estoy en un lugar que estoy pagando y si la persona vende la casa o simplemente le da la gana y me dice que tengo que irme, pues me tengo que ir.**

*Because if I had the certainty that it is my house... I know that as long as I do not stop making the payments, I can continue living there. However, if I am in a place where I am paying rent and if the person sells the house or simply feels like telling me that I have to leave, well, I have to leave.*

Women also face **sexual harassment** from landlords and/or housemates. One survivor was harassed by the owner of the house where she rented the basement. The owner demanded sexual favors as a condition for allowing her to continue to rent the space. The owner's partner discovered what was happening and evicted the survivor. However, sexual harassment is not only directed at survivors, but also at their teenage daughters. One survivor (P701) described how her teenage daughter was harassed by people who lived in the same house:

Por ejemplo, mi hija ya tenía 16 años y habían hombres adultos de unos 30 años [que le decían] 'no más cumplas 18, te llevo conmigo', 'ay que buenota te estas poniendo' o 'mira tu cuerpazo.' **Eso es ese acoso que ya van sintiendo las niñas por parte de personas adultas viviendo en una misma casa.**

*For example, my daughter was already 16 years old and there were adult men in their 30s [who told her] 'as soon as you turn 18, I'll take you with me', 'oh you are becoming quite a hottie' or 'look at your hot bod.' It is that type of harassment that girls start getting from adults living in the same house.*

## Impact on the Children

Many survivors have been **forced to have two or three jobs** to be able to afford paying their expenses, lengthening their work hours. This not only has repercussions in the lives of the survivors, but also in the lives of their children. While sharing these experiences, one participant (P501) emphasized the impact of this reality on her children:

● Pero aquí no pasaron carencias en esa forma (pobreza), pero si pasaron carencias de falta de amor en muchos sentidos porque como **yo solamente me dedicaba a trabajar y a trabajar y a trabajar.**

● *But here they did not lack anything in that regard (poverty), but they did experience a lack of love in many ways because I **only worked and worked and worked.***

**Long work hours** also contribute to the fear participants feel regarding the physical and emotional safety of their children. One participant (P701) shared what it felt like to leave her children alone for long periods of time:

● Pues sí...nosotros las mamás, si nos exponemos, pero de cierta forma **nuestros hijos están más expuestos porque nosotras salimos a trabajar, ellos quedan.** Estamos viviendo con personas desconocidas... cualquier cosa que les pueda pasar, cualquier cosa.

● *Well yes...us mothers, we expose ourselves, but in a way **our children are more exposed because we go out to work, they stay behind.** We are living with strangers... anything can happen to them, anything.*

Another participant (P501) expressed the fear she **felt for her safety and that of her daughter:**

● El esposo de la señora [con quien vivíamos] tenía muchas amistades hombres y yo siempre estaba con ese miedo de que a mi hija le fuera a pasar algo, con ese temor siempre pendiente de ella...**el miedo a la violencia sexual o también a ofrecimientos, que lo ven a uno y le ofrecen cosas a cambio de una vivienda.**

● *The lady's husband [with whom we lived] had many male friends and I was always afraid that something could happen to my daughter, always with that fear, always looking after her...**the fear of sexual violence or soliciting, they see you and offer you things in exchange for housing.***

The toll that a move might have on **children's school performance is a major concern** for many of participants as they consider looking for a better home for their family. This is how a mother explained it (P202):

● Porque cuando uno se muda de casa, siempre tiene que hacer el cambio de escuela. **Y quieran o no, los niños siempre resienten el cambio,** más que nada por la escuela.

● *Because when you move from one house to another, you always have to change schools. **And like it or not, children always suffer when moving,** mostly because of school.*

Several participants commented on the **repercussions that changing schools has on their children** due to a move. These changes affect both the performance and well-being of children. A participant (P202) shared:

● Ahora que me moví, cambié a mi hija de la escuela y como que apenas [se] está acoplando.. y ahora iniciar acá es muy diferente. **Y ella dice que no, como que todavía no se acopla.**



- *Now that I moved, I enrolled my daughter in a different school and she is just now getting used to it... and starting all over again here is very different. **And she says that no, she has not quite adjusted yet.***

Another survivor (P201) recounted a similar experience:

- *A mí me tocó con mis hijos porque yo estuve viviendo 9 años en un [domicilio] cuando tomé la decisión de moverme. **Me costó, mis hijos, hasta lloraban porque los tenía que cambiar.** Batalle un año yéndolos y trayéndolos a la escuela, pero se me hacía difícil por la cuestión de que tenía tantos trabajos.*
- *It happened to me with my children because I had been living at an [address] for 9 years when I made the decision to move. **It was hard for me, my children even cried because we had to move.** I struggled for a year taking them to and from school, it was difficult for me because I had so many jobs.*

## Discrimination and Language Barriers

Participants detailed the detrimental impact these housing experiences have had on their **overall mental health and well-being**. Many of them feel trapped in rental units that do not meet their needs or in situations where landlords take advantage of their vulnerability. For example, a participant (P501) mentioned:

- *La gente muchas veces se aprovecha de uno en lugar de orientarlo... **yo llegué con dos hijos, con el autoestima bien malo, o sea [a] un lugar completamente desconocido, no manejar, no hablar el idioma, no tener un social para poder trabajar....** Ella (la arrendadora) me cobraba a mí la mitad [de la renta de la casa] por un cuarto, más los 'bills', más \$100 por poner a mis niños en el bus, más \$100 de comida. **Para poder solventar todo eso, yo tenía 2 trabajos...entonces duré así 4 años.***
- *People often take advantage of you instead of guiding you...**I arrived with two children, with a very low self-esteem, [to] a completely foreign place, I didn't drive, didn't speak the language, not having a social [security number] to work....** She (the landlady) charged me half [the rent of the house] for a room, plus the bills, plus \$100 for getting my children on the bus, plus \$100 for food. **To be able to pay for all of that, I had 2 jobs...so I went on like that for 4 years.***

Most survivors explicitly stated that they consider that these dynamics stem from discrimination based on their ethnicity, immigration status, and language barriers. One participant (P202) shared:

- *Si el alquiler de un apartamento vale \$1200 – **como usted no habla el idioma, como le están haciendo un favor, como se lo van a rentar a usted que es ilegal, que no habla el idioma...entonces se lo rentan en \$1500 a usted.***
- *If the going rate for an apartment is \$1,200 – **since you don't speak the language, since they're doing you a favor, since they're going to rent it to you and you're illegal, and you don't speak the language...then they'll rent it to you for \$1,500.***



Another participant (P601) explained that, due to her **immigration status**, she was unable to obtain a rental unit:



**...uno a veces no tiene aún estatus legal en este país, y ve que cuando uno no tiene eso, no le dan opción.** Sin estatus legal, no nos dan apartamento, una casa... pues **uno se tiene que conformar con rentar un cuarto en algún lado.**

*...sometimes you still don't have legal status in this country, and you know that when you don't have that, they don't give you an option. Without legal status, they don't give us an apartment, or a house... so you have to settle for renting a room somewhere.*

Notably, all participants in this study identified **language as an essential factor in navigating** the US housing system. Participants agreed that being able to communicate in their preferred language is critical. One participant shared (P202):



[Es importante poder] entender lo que te están explicando porque **de nada sirve que te lo estén diciendo si no lo entiendes...**El idioma es lo más importante.

*[It is important to be able] to understand what they are explaining because **it's useless to be told something if you don't understand it...** Language is the most important thing.*

Another participant further elaborated on other **repercussions of not speaking or understanding the dominant language** (P601):



Hay personas que dejan de hacer muchas cosas por eso que no hablan inglés... Porque hay muchas personas que tienen miedo a ir a lugares (a buscar vivienda) porque no les van a entender porque no hay personas que hablan español y pues ellos no hablan inglés...**Muchas veces da miedo no entender el idioma.**

*There are people who avoid doing many things because they don't speak English... There are lots of people who are afraid of going places (to look for housing) because they won't be understood, because no one there speaks Spanish and they [survivors] don't speak English...**Many times it's scary not understanding the language.***

For many survivors, bringing a support person to interpret for them when looking for housing is not feasible. Thus, in some instances, they have had to sign housing contracts that they do not fully understand. One participant (P501) explained:



Demasiada, demasiada falta de información en español, en verdad, muchísima falta. Hasta incluso **en los lugares donde uno va a rentar que todo lo firma uno en inglés, y en inglés, y en inglés. Y con tal de que le den el apartamento uno solo firma, y firma, y firma... y uno ni siquiera sabía ni lo que firmó.**

*There's a great lack of information in Spanish, a huge lack. Even in places where one is going to rent, one signs everything in English, in English, and in English. And as long as they give you the apartment, you just sign, and sign, and sign... and you don't even know what you signed.*



## Objective 2: Understand how Latina immigrant survivors define safe and stable housing

Latina immigrant survivors' definition of safe and stable housing is directly related to their lived experiences of insecurity and instability, especially when facing multiple barriers as they seek to obtain and maintain housing in the US. In this second aim, we separate the concepts of safety and stability to highlight the importance of both principles. It is important to emphasize that participants identified both concepts as fundamental elements of *una vivienda digna y justa* (living with dignity in fair housing).

### Safe Housing

Safety is a critical element for all survivors as they search for housing. Unfortunately, for many Latina immigrant survivors being able to obtain safe housing is not an easy process. Participants not only have to consider their personal safety when they find themselves unhoused, but also when obtaining housing. One participant (P203) explained that **safety is more than having a place to live:**

- [Hay] muchísima gente que, **aunque tiene donde vivir, tiene un techo, no es un hogar porque no es un lugar seguro.**
- *[There are] many people who, **although they have a place to live, they have a roof over their heads, they do not have a home because it's not a safe place.***

This emphasis on safe housing stems from the harrowing experiences that put survivors at risk for physical and emotional harm. Undoubtedly, these experiences mark the way in which participants define safe housing. For survivors, safe housing refers to a space where they feel equally physically and emotionally safe. **All participants - without exception - discussed the interrelated nature of both aspects of safety, in which physical and emotional safety go hand in hand.** For survivors, having a home that offers physical and emotional safety is more than a necessity; it is a fundamental human right, as one participant (P801) explained:

- La vivienda es uno de los derechos fundamentales del ser humano. Entonces, **es tan básico y elemental para el desarrollo emocional, físico, económico de una persona...** Me parece un poco incongruente que, en un país con tantas accesibilidades de primer mundo pues todavía se sigan viendo condiciones de vivienda infrahumanas.
- *Housing is one of the fundamental rights of a human being. **It is so basic and fundamental for the emotional, physical, economic development of a person...** It seems a bit incongruent to me that, in a country with much first-world accessibility, substandard housing conditions continue to exist.*

Survivors defined physical safety as a place where they and their children have the possibility of walking through the neighborhood without worrying about being attacked, **where they are not exposed to any type of harassment not inside or outside their home**, and where they can share their living space with people they trust. A participant (P203) reflected on what safe housing means to her:

Yo opino que un hogar es **un lugar donde uno se sienta seguro en todos los aspectos**, que las personas con las que uno viva sean personas seguras, que uno no se tenga miedo de 'ay no se si puedo dejar la puerta abierta, me puede sacar algo, me puede decir algo,' o sea, no importa que uno tengo un hogar, pero **si uno no está seguro es como si uno no tuviera nada...**

*In my opinion, a home is **a place where one feels safe in all respects**, that the people with whom you live with are trustworthy, that you are not afraid of 'oh I don't know if I can leave the door open, someone could take something, they could say something to me,' that is, it doesn't matter that you have a home, **if you're not safe, it's like not having anything at all...***

Many participants have had no other option but to live in unsafe neighborhoods due to the lack of institutional support. Even with multiple jobs, their income is not enough for them to afford to live in a safer neighborhood. For survivors, an important aspect of safe housing is being in a crime-free neighborhood. As one survivor (P601) mentioned:

[Poder] salir afuera y que no se sienta uno con algún temor de que el vecino me va a decir algo o me va a pasar algo si salgo a la puerta.

*[Being able] to go outside and not feel afraid that the neighbor is going to say something to me or something is going to happen to me if I go out.*

Survivors unequivocally discussed that a fundamental requirement for housing is a physically safe space that is **healthy and habitable**. Participants described housing that has an **adequate and reliable supply of essential utilities** that provide them with healthy conditions that promote their family's well-being, as one participant (P201) commented:

**Una vivienda segura es que no falten todos los servicios necesarios...** Y que este todo, que tenga su todos sus servicios, la casa donde estas viviendo que esté adecuada para vivir que es lo más importante es la verdad.

***Safe housing refers to a space where basic utilities are not lacking...**And where everything is there, all utilities available, the house in which you live needs to be adequately equipped for living in it, which is truly the most important thing.*

For survivors, being able to enjoy emotional safety in their home means having the opportunity to feel happy with their families in a space that allows them to rest, enjoy one another's company, and be at peace. However, the recurring sentiment from participants is that the remuneration they receive for their work is insufficient, which hinders that possibility, as shared by one survivor (P701):

**Pues yo creo que sería como de tener un lugar donde uno pueda llegar en paz, que los niños estén felices**, y que tengan su propio espacio, que si quieren estar en la sala, estar en la sala, si quieren estar en su cuarto, en su cuarto...o sea que vaya de acuerdo pues a mis ingresos. **Pero allí a veces también está el problema de que el ingreso no alcanza para un lugar así.**

***Well, I think it would be about having a place where you can come home and be at ease, where children are happy**, and where they have their own space, where if they want to be in the living room, they can be in the living room, if they want to be in their room, they can be*

*in their room...that is, according to my income. **But sometimes that's the problem, that my income is not enough for a place like that.***

Most participants have gone through challenging experiences living with strangers in order to cover housing costs. Therefore, they feel safer when they live with only their immediate family members, as mentioned by a survivor (P202):



*Yo hoy en día por lo regular siempre he vivido no con tantas personas, o con personas que no conozco por la seguridad de mi hija menor. **Entonces...vivo ya prácticamente solo [con] familia. Y es el lugar donde uno se siente más seguro porque ya no hay personas extrañas. Y es que siento que ahora mi hija está más segura.***

*Nowadays, I have always lived not with so many people, or with people I don't know for the safety of my youngest daughter. **So...I now practically live alone [with] family. And it is the place where one feels the safest because there are no strangers. And now I feel that my daughter is safer.***

Living alone with their immediate family members also allows survivors to feel safe and comfortable, without fear of being violated while they sleep, as expressed by a participant (P801):



*Sentirme segura en el aspecto de que, ok, **puedo dormir en las noches más tranquila, de que nadie va a tocarme, violarme, hacerme algo así.***

*Feel safe in the sense that, ok, **I can sleep more peacefully at night knowing that no one is going to touch me, rape me, or do anything like that to me.***

## Stable Housing

Participants also emphasized the importance of stable housing, particularly when reflecting on their multiple harmful experiences in rental units or when finding themselves without a home. A participant (P301) detailed **how costly being homeless can be**:



***Sale mucho más caro ser homeless...** porque uno no tiene comida, tiene que comprar comida de la calle, uno no puede cocinar su propia comida, o no tiene acceso a la comida... Es la comida que te sale más cara, es el acceso a la lavandería, es el acceso a todas a todas las cosas extras que se pagan por no tener un lugar estable con servicios. **Son gastos que se acumulan y termina uno pagando más por estar inestable, que por estar pagando un lugar fijo. Es más caro, y es más doloroso económica y emocionalmente porque el cheque que uno tiene, el ingreso que uno tiene, pues se va rápido, rápido.***

***It's so much more expensive to be homeless...** because you don't have food, you have to buy food off the street, you can't cook your own food, or you don't have access to food... **It's food that's more expensive, it's access to the laundromat, it's what you have to pay in order to have access to all the extra things for not having a stable home with utilities. They are expenses that accumulate, and you end up paying more for being unstable, than for paying for a permanent place. It is more expensive, and it's more painful financially and emotionally because the check you receive, the income you have, well, it goes quickly, quickly.***

The process of **obtaining housing is a considerable expense for participants**. Participants shared that on many occasions, they have to pay for each housing application, and then, to obtain housing, they have to pay a deposit and up to two to three months' rent. A survivor (P203) described the high cost of obtaining housing for her family:

Yo he tenido que tener dos o tres trabajos para poder tener una casa estable... **porque como uno no tiene los requisitos para obtenerla a veces la gente se pasa y te pide lo que es el depósito y dos rentas**. Y en vez uno tiene que sacrificarse para obtenerlo. En esta casa donde yo estoy, yo tuve que pagar dos rentas y un depósito que fueron \$7,800 --- es bastante. A veces no alcanza ni para la comida, a veces no alcanza para los bills, pero pues uno se tiene que rebuscar en este país.

*I've had to have two or three jobs to be able to have a stable home...because since you don't meet the requirements to obtain one [housing], sometimes people take advantage of that and ask you for the deposit money and two rents worth. And sometimes, you have to make sacrifices to get it. [To get] the house where I live now, I had to pay two rents and a deposit which totalled \$7,800 --- it's quite a lot. Sometimes there's not enough left over for food, sometimes it's not enough for bills, but well, you have to find a way in this country.*

As participants reflected on their experiences with housing, many shared that despite having to pay rent, they did not consider their housing to be stable. Participants worried about the possibility of a **sudden eviction or unexpected rent increases** that would leave them unhoused without warning, as one survivor (P102) shared:

Porque si supiera que es mi casa, aunque la estoy pagando, yo sé que mientras que no la deje de pagar, yo puedo seguir viviendo allí. Mas sin embargo, **estoy en un lugar que estoy pagando y si la persona vende la casa o simplemente le da la gana y me dice que tengo que irme, pues me tengo que ir**.

*If I knew that this house is my house, even though I'm [still] paying for it, I know that as long as I don't miss a payment, I can keep living here. However, [if] I'm in a place paying rent, and the person (owner) sells the house or simply feels like telling me I have to leave, well, I have to leave.*

Another survivor (P601) shared that the **uncertainty of whether she would be able to afford rent** prevented her from feeling stable:

[Mi vivienda] no es muy estable porque el día de mañana por cualquier cosa, o yo me enfermo y no puedo trabajar o mi mamá se enferma y no puede trabajar, nos van a terminar corriendo porque aquí no les importa lo que está pasando, su situación. Lo que ellos quieren es que uno les pague la renta. **Estable es hasta el día que la podamos pagar, eso es estar estable. Si algún mes que no podamos pagar, no**.

*[My home] isn't very stable because if, one fine day, for whatever reason, either I get sick and can't work or my mom gets sick and can't work, they're going to end up evicting us because here they don't care what's happening, what your situation is like. What they want is for you to pay the rent. **Being stable is only until the day we can pay, that is being stable. If some month we can't pay, then no.***



These experiences of instability have had a profound influence on how participants define stable housing. Without exception, all participants aspire to own their own homes. Many expressed that home ownership would give them stability and peace they need. While describing her **ideal home**, a participant (P501) voiced:



En lo personal, **yo quiero comprar mi casa**. [Una vivienda estable es] **tener una casa, no lujosa, sino una casa de acuerdo a mis posibilidades, pero tener algo propio**, tener algo que yo diga, 'bueno aquí ya no me voy a ir, aquí voy a estar.'

*Personally, I want to buy my house. [A stable housing is] **having a house, nothing luxurious, but a house according to my possibilities, a place I can call my own**, somewhere I can say, 'well, I'm not going anywhere, I'm staying here.'*

For many, their greatest motivation is to be able to provide a **stable home for their children**. One participant (P901) expressed this sentiment when sharing her dream of owning her own home:



Nosotros hemos pasado por muchos altibajos y mis hijos han pasado por mucho.... Ha sido mucha inestabilidad. **Entonces ya quiero brindarles a ellos esa vivienda estable, esa vivienda fija, que ellos sepan que ya allí estamos. Que ya no hay más cambio. Que ya no hay más que tenemos que salir corriendo. Que ya no hay más que tenemos que perder nuestras cosas, tener que dejarlas en una bodega, empacadas**. Yo ya no quiero que ellos pasen más por eso.

*We have gone through many ups and downs and my children have been through a lot... There has been a lot of instability. **So now, I want to offer them a stable home, a permanent home, where they'll know we're there for good. That there are no more changes. That we don't have to leave in a hurry. That we don't have to let go of our belongings, or leave them in storage**. I don't want them to go through that anymore.*

Another participant (P701) also shared:



...Pues tener mi propio espacio, que mis niños tengan su espacio, que tengan su comida, que se puedan tomar una agua fría, que se puedan tomar una soda fría, que ellos puedan disponer de ir, abrir una refri a la hora que ellos quieran. De que yo me sienta con la libertad de cocinarles a cualquier hora, que pueda cocinar lo que a ellos le gusta, sin necesidad de que me estén diciendo [arrendadores] que mucho gas se utiliza, mucha luz se utiliza. Que sean libres de ver tele a la hora que ellos quieran... **aunque parezca que no son cosas que valen la pena, pues para ellos sí, porque son cosas que toda su vida han estado limitados a eso. Ellos han crecido todo este tiempo con limitaciones a muchas cosas**.

*... Well, to have my own space, that my children have their own space, have their food, where they can have a drink of cold water, or drink a cold soda, where they can go, open the fridge at whatever time they want. Where I feel free to cook for them at any time, where I can cook what they like, without having to hear them [landlords] tell me that I'm using a lot of gas, or a lot of electricity. Where they can be free to watch TV whenever they want... **even if these things seem not to be worthwhile, for them they are, because they have lived with these limitations all their lives. All this time, they've been raised with limitations to many things**.*

Despite their aspirations, many survivors find it is impossible to obtain housing due to the multitude of **obstacles that immigrants face** in the US. This is particularly true if they have not yet regularized their immigration status. One participant (P601) explained:

- Pero lastimosamente, por las cosas legales, **a veces uno no puede [comprar una casa], tiene que estar rentando.**
- *But sadly, because of legal issues, **sometimes you can't [buy a house], you have to rent.***

This perspective was echoed by another participant (P801):

- **Tantas cosas que quiero lograr un día por mi sola, sin la ayuda de nadie. Un techo. Las llaves de mi propia casa...** Quisiera poderme comprar una casa – no puedo, no tengo papeles, no tengo crédito, no tengo esto, no tengo nada. Así tenga dinero, no se [puede].
- ***So many things that I want to achieve on my own one day, without anyone's help. A roof over my head. The keys to my own house...** I wish I could buy a house – I can't, I don't have papers, I don't have credit [history], I don't have this, I don't have anything. Even if you have money, it's not [possible].*

## Housing that Promotes Living with Dignity

It is noteworthy that several participants used the term 'dignity' when sharing their ideas regarding safe and stable housing in the US. This terminology is important and notable, particularly since the interviews were conducted in Spanish. In Spanish, the word 'dignity' has a profound meaning that is generally associated with respect and integrity, coupled with a deep sense of feeling valued and whole. For example, one definition of dignity refers to the "quality of someone who behaves responsibly, with respect for themselves and others, and who does not allow themselves to be humiliated or degraded" (Lexico, 2022).

Aligned with this definition, survivors highlighted the importance of a place that allows them to live with dignity as they discussed safe and stable housing. For the participants in this study, housing that allows them to live with dignity refers to a space that is not only safe and stable, but also a unit that has all essential utilities, a place that allows them to maintain their dignity as one survivor (P301) commented:

- Un lugar en el que puede estar tranquila, con acceso a los servicios básicos -no lujos, los servicios básicos para mantener mi dignidad... estable. **Ese sería un lugar que para mí define un hogar que me permite mantener mi dignidad y que tiene acceso a los servicios básicos.**
- *A place where you can be at ease, with access to utilities - not luxuries, the basic services to maintain my dignity... stable. **That's the definition I would use, a home that allows me to maintain my dignity and has access to utilities.***



Another participant (P801) agreed on the importance of housing that has **access to all utilities and basic services**:



[Vivienda digna significa]... acceso a **un hogar con las condiciones mínimas de acceso a agua, a luz, comunicación, transporte** porque, incluso, es increíble como el transporte va también ligado a acceder a un lugar para vivir.

*[Housing that allows me to live with dignity means]... **a home with access to the basic services of water, electricity, communication, transportation.** Because it is amazing how transportation is also linked to having access to a place to live.*

When discussing housing that allows them to live with dignity, participants described housing where they can feel tranquil and free of worries regarding their **children's physical and emotional safety**. One survivor (P701) shared:



Pues para mi un lugar digno donde vivir es donde yo pueda llegar y sentirme segura, donde yo pueda sentir que mis hijos están seguros, **donde podemos estar en paz, donde podemos salir a que los niños lleguen a jugar afuera, sin tener miedo.**

*Well, for me, to have housing that allows me to live with dignity is a place where when I come home, I can feel safe, where I can feel that my children are safe, **where we can be at peace, where we can go out so the children can play outside, without being afraid.***

Several participants shared their aspiration for homeownership, which allows them to maintain their dignity and offer their **children physical and emotional stability**. One participant explained (P201):



Entonces también mi sueño es ese: **tener mi propia casa para no estarme mudando de un lugar a otro y más que nada por mis hijos y por la estabilidad de ellos.**

*So my dream is also: **to have my own house so I don't have to move from one place to another, more than anything [I want that] for my children and their stability.***

Participants emphasized that dignified housing not only entails a safe and stable home and a space where they feel **free to make it their own**, to accommodate it to their liking, without restrictions, and with the certainty that they will not be suddenly evicted. Therefore, all participants aspire to own their own home, as expressed by a survivor (P203):



**Exactamente...que pudiera comprarme – no una gran casa, simplemente un lugar digno donde uno pudiera estar comfortable con uno.** Uno dice pongo aquí esta planta, y aquí se queda. Aquí pongo esta basura y aquí se queda.

***Exactly...that I could purchase – not a big house, just a place where I can live with dignity, where you can feel comfortable with yourself.** Where you can say I'm putting this plant right here, and there it stays. I'm putting this trash here and there it stays.*



*I can tell they are people that really love their work. I think that to be able to help someone and work for a [DV] organization, you also need to have a calling. **They are people who laugh with you, cry with you. They take everything to a personal level to help every survivor of domestic violence...***

Another participant (P801) shared a very similar perspective when discussing her experience with first seeking services from the community-based organization:

Desde que llegué a [organización], me proveyeron ropa para ir a mi corte de la orden de protección, transporte, me dieron comida ese día, me tuvieron todo el día con ellas, y lo más lindo es la apertura... Hablar con [intercesora], llorar con ella, abrazarla, y sentir eso tan bonito que ella me escuchaba. **Y nunca me preguntó por una prueba, por un documento. Nunca dudó de lo que yo dije.. ¡Nunca! Eso no tiene precio.**

*From the moment I arrived at [organization], I was provided with clothes to go to court for my protection order hearing, transportation, they gave me food that day, they stayed with me all day, and the most beautiful thing of it all is their openness... Talking with [advocate], crying with her, hugging her, and the beautiful feeling of being heard by her. **And she never asked me for any proof, or any document. She never doubted what I said.. Never! That is priceless.***

Many of the study participants narrated how the advocates from the community-based organization helped them not only with **obtaining housing but also with their immigration processes**. One survivor (P302) explained her process as follows:

[La intercesora] me dijo mire dice que vaya acá...Fue como encontré trabajo allí ya fue donde empecé. Y ella me dijo el segundo paso - que busquemos un lugar [para vivir]...vamos a ver apartamentos. Y ya, ella me ayudó a llenar una aplicación, la fui a dejar, y calificué, gracias a Dios. Y es como yo encontré donde vivir... [Organización de base comunitaria] me apoyó tanto en buscar mis papeles, en obtener los papeles para mis hijos, me movieron [de casa]. **Ellas se hacían su vida hilos conmigo con tal de apoyarme porque yo no tenía transporte, yo no hablo el idioma. Entonces ellas fueron, buscaron la manera, me dieron las herramientas...** Eso es lo que [organización de base comunitaria] tiene - **que lucha porque la mujer inmigrante sobresalga, florezca, crezca, y salga adelante.**

*[Advocate] said look, it says you can go here... That was how I found a job there, that was where I started. And she told me the second step - that we look for a place [to live]...let's go look at apartments. And just like that she helped me fill out an application, I went to drop it off, and I qualified, thank God. And that's how I found a place to live... [Community-based organization] supported me so much in obtaining my papers, in getting the papers for my children, they helped me move. **They intertwined their lives with mine in order to support me because I didn't have transportation, I don't speak the language. They went above and beyond, they found a way, and they gave me the tools...** That's what [community-based organization] does - **they fight so that immigrant women can excel, flourish, grow, and get ahead.***

Survivors also expressed how meaningful it has been to have **advocates follow up** with them, as one survivor (P801) stated:



[Nombre de organización] es un support tan grande, **están siempre chequeando que todo esté bien, que los procesos se lleven a cabo, que fluyas con tu ritmo. Eso me ha encantado tanto...** Todas coincidimos que cuando una vez tenemos esa conexión con ellas, eso no muere. Ellas tienen una capacidad – un alma tan pura, un corazón tan grande – que están siempre pendientes de todas nosotras.

*[Name of organization] is such a great source of support, **they are always checking to see if everything is fine, that the processes are carried out, that you flow at your own pace. I have loved that so much...** We all agree that once we have that connection with them, that doesn't die. They are so competent – such a pure soul, such a big heart – they are always looking out for all of us.*

The support participants described is not solely focused on receiving supportive services from advocates. Participants also stressed how valuable it is to be part of a **community where survivors can encourage each other**. This allows them to co-create a support network that transcends the community-based organization itself, as one participant (P301) reflected:



Con [organización de base comunitaria] yo he sentido el apoyo, **el acercamiento a una agrupación de mujeres que se entienden como mujeres, que nos dan el respeto, que nos dejan usar nuestra voz, que nos dejan expresarnos, que nos dieron acceso a herramientas.**

*With [community-based organization] I have felt support, I have felt **that closeness of a group of women who understand each other as women, who offer respect, and let us use our voice to express ourselves, and they gave us access to tools.***

Another participant (P801) agreed, conveying her experience:



En este grupo de sororidad que hemos creado con [nombre de organización], donde uno se refugia, habla, hasta se desahoga a lo característico de nuestra cultura - que es con expresiones y palabras inapropiadas. Pero tenemos esa confianza...**Aquí me siento bien, me siento segura, me siento feliz, me siento que soy yo, me siento pue puedo hablar como yo quiero, siento que puedo expresar lo que yo quiero y nadie me va a juzgar ni me va a criticar.** Hermoso. Eso es hermoso.

*In this sisterhood that we have created with [name of organization], where one takes refuge, speaks, one can even vent like we do in our culture - which is using inappropriate expressions and words. We can trust each other like that...**I feel good here, I feel safe, I feel happy, I feel like myself, I feel like I can speak how I want, I feel like I can express what I want and no one is going to judge or criticize me.** Beautiful. That is beautiful.*

Survivors expressed that **holistic and comprehensive supportive services** provided them with emotional support as well as valuable information about how to interact with this country's legal, housing and healthcare systems. One participant (P901) detailed her experience in the focus groups:

- A mi me gustaba mucho ir a los grupos de apoyo de las latinas porque [intercesoras] **siempre tenían información demasiado valiosa para nosotras**. Desde cómo hablar en corte, cómo vestirse, cómo presentar tu caso, cómo sentarte. Todo...En los grupos de apoyo ellas siempre nos llevaban cualquier cantidad de información. Entonces yo siempre ponía mucho cuidado a todo.
- *I really liked going to support group for Latinas because [advocates] **always had very valuable information for us**. From how to speak in court, how to dress, how to present your case, how to sit. Everything... In support group, they always provided us with an incredible amount of information. So I always paid a lot of attention to everything.*

## Culturally-Grounded Housing Services

When sharing their housing experiences in the US, all survivors agreed on the urgency of increasing the access to supportive housing services that include information regarding the process of obtaining housing. Participants also emphasized that it is critical to **consider cultural differences** when providing housing services, mainly when providing information about how to navigate the US housing systems, as one participant (P801) shared:

- [Mi sugerencia es] que tengan más empatía con la situación migratoria [de las sobrevivientes latinas] porque **yo no sé cómo funciona acá el sistema ni cómo se mueve la vaina**.
- *[I suggest that they] have more empathy regarding [Latina survivors'] migratory situation because **I don't know how the system works here or how things get done**.*

Participants stressed that the lack of accessible information is a significant barrier to obtaining safe and stable housing. Although some information is available in Spanish on the rights and obligations of tenants and landlords, it is still **challenging for Latina immigrant survivors to access it and receive the necessary guidance** to make use of this information. One survivor (P601) described the fear that many people feel when navigating a housing system they are not familiar with:

- A veces las personas [inmigrantes] necesitan más apoyo, **como más conocimiento de las reglas, como son las cosas para rentar, que les expliquen más a las personas del proceso de rentar para entender mejor y no tener tanto miedo...** Si llevaran la sabiduría del proceso, se les haría más fácil.
- *Sometimes [immigrant] people need more support, **like more knowledge of the rules, how things work in order to rent, have the rental process explained in depth to better understand and not be so afraid...** If they had knowledge of the process, it would be easier for them.*

Therefore, one participant (P501) suggested **increasing the sources of information and supportive services** so that Latina immigrant survivors can access housing that allows them to live with dignity:

Hace falta mucha mucha información, que hayan espacios educativos...como tener talleres para poder inculcarle más a las personas como en realidad uno le debe de hacer para poder llegar a tener más información para poder tener un apartamento. **Pero en un mundo perfecto, me gustaría que las señoras que son madres solteras tengan más apoyo para poder rentar un apartamento y no tener que estarse defendiendo de un dueño de casa o de otra persona que tenga el apartamento a su nombre, que se esté aprovechando de ellas.**

*There is a need for a lot, a lot of information, and educational spaces... like workshops to instill in people what you should really do in order to access the information that will help you obtain an apartment. **But in a perfect world, I would like single mothers to have more support to rent an apartment and not have to keep defending themselves from a landlord or another person who has the apartment in their name, who is taking advantage of them.***

Most participants also suggested **improving the training provided to direct service staff** working with Latina IPV survivors. Participants consider that advocates in mainstream organizations are usually unfamiliar with immigrant survivors' realities, particularly around housing. One participant (P202) shared:

[Yo quisiera] que [las organizaciones] apoyaran a las personas como los inmigrantes para que fuéramos tomados en cuenta - **que [supieran que] las personas como nosotros sufrimos tanto por el idioma, por ser hispanos, que nos discriminan, que a la vez que vamos a buscar una renta, no nos la dan...**[Yo quisiera] que apoyaran a las necesidades de nosotras, de las personas inmigrantes.

*[I would like] that [organizations] would support people like immigrants so that we are **taken into consideration - so that [they know] that people like us suffer so much because of the language, for being Hispanic, that we are discriminated against, that when we go looking for a place to rent, they won't give it to us...** [I would like them to] support our needs, the needs of immigrant people.*

Several participants emphasized that even though they all emigrated from a Latin American country, there may well be **cultural differences that need to be taken into account** when providing services, as mentioned by one participant (P102):

Entonces las organizaciones deberían de recibir más educación sobre lo que es la comunidad [latina] y toda su cultura o diferentes culturas porque no es lo mismo una persona de México con una persona de El Salvador o alguien que viene de Sudamérica. **Todos venimos de habla hispana pero la cultura es diferente, la tradición es diferente, la manera en cómo decir las cosas es diferente.**

*Organizations ought to learn more about what the [Latinx] community is and all its culture or different cultures because a person from Mexico is not the same as a person from El Salvador or someone who comes from South America. **We all come from Spanish speaking countries but the culture is different, the traditions are different, the way we say things is different.***



If a culturally and contextually responsive approach is not integrated to service provision, those services may not be **aligned with survivors' needs and priorities**. For instance, all survivors indicated that they aspire to own their own home. However, participants do not have access to the necessary resources to effectively navigate the system. One participant (P201) shared her experience:



Estoy tratando de comprar – pero me ponen muchas trabas. [Me] pidieron una cantidad elevada que uno no puede proporcionar. **Entonces a mí sí me gustaría si se pudiera, que nos apoyaran en ese aspecto de que uno pudiera obtener su propia vivienda.**

*I'm trying to buy – but they make it so hard, so many obstacles. I was asked for a large sum that I couldn't provide. **So I would like, if possible, to have the necessary support in order for me to be able to acquire my own home.***

## Supportive Services in Survivors' Preferred Language

As mentioned above, survivors were unequivocal about the importance of being **able to access services and information in their preferred language**. One participant (P601) expressed:



Tal vez si los programas que quieren ayudar a las mujeres [inmigrantes latinas] tuvieran traductores... sería mejor porque **hay muchas personas que tienen miedo porque no entienden el idioma**. Deberían tener más personas que puedan ayudarles a traducirles.

*Maybe if programs that want to help [Latina immigrant] women had translators... it would be better because **there are many people who are afraid because they don't understand the language**. They should have more people who can help translate for them.*

**Unmet language needs and lack of culturally and contextually responsive housing services** limit the type of housing survivors can access, as one participant (P801) mentioned:



Hay personas que ni siquiera leen en español porque hablan idiomas nativos y apenas hablan inglés. **Entonces para evitar todo ese procedimiento, ellos prefieren así – rentar cuarto para acá, vivir así para directo... sin intermediarios.**

*There are people who don't even read in Spanish because they speak indigenous languages and barely speak English. **So to avoid the whole process, they prefer this – rent a room here, live like that, negotiating directly... without intermediaries.***

It should be noted that language justice goes beyond the translation and interpretation of resources. Language justice refers to the right that every person has to express themselves in the language in which they feel most powerful and complete (Antena Aire, 2020). Therefore, prioritizing language justice when providing housing services requires a process of **cultural and contextual adaptation**, as one survivor (P801) explained:

Por más que te lo traduzcan, no es lo mismo. Tendría que haber educación [acerca de los sistemas de vivienda] tal vez. **Las formas que se llevan a cabo [los procesos] acá no son las mismas con las que nosotros estamos acostumbrados en nuestro país...**

*However much they might translate for you, it's not the same. There should be more education [about housing systems] maybe. **The ways [the processes] are carried out here are not the same as the ones we are familiar with in our country...***

Often, this includes a two-way process of meaning negotiation to ensure that the message is received as intended (Romero et al., 2020). This approach is essential to ensure survivors receive the support they need to obtain stable and safe housing. One participant (P203) described:

[Yo recomiendo] que den los servicios en el idioma porque **mi español no es el mismo español de la gente de Guatemala, la gente de El Salvador. Alguna palabra que yo entiendo, ellos la entienden de otra forma.** Y la gente que nos ayuda me lo explica en español que yo puedo entender... Pero la otra persona que viene de Guatemala, de Honduras, no lo está entendiendo igual.

*[I suggest that they] provide services in [survivor's] language, because **my Spanish is not the same Spanish as the one of the people from Guatemala, or people from El Salvador. Some words that I understand a certain way, they understand another way.*** And the people who help us can explain it to me in Spanish that I can understand... But another person, who comes from Guatemala, from Honduras, might not be understanding it the same way.



Image 3. Word cloud from survivors' recommendations to improve housing services for Latina immigrant survivors.



## Implications and Recommendations

Although this study explores housing experiences with a small group of immigrant IPV survivors from Latin America, its results offer important implications for researchers, funders, technical assistance providers, and direct service providers. Study implications are focused on: (1) the definition of safe and stable housing; (2) the importance of language justice in housing supportive services; (3) access to home ownership and wealth building strategies.

### Definition of Safe and Stable Housing

First, study findings indicate that it is critical to expand our definitions of stability and safety. Findings highlight the fallacy of assuming that everyone refers to the same constructs when discussing stable and safe housing. It is important to recognize that definitions are not static; they evolve and change according to different sociopolitical contexts and life experiences. Thus, service providers must clarify these key definitions to ensure that the services and resources they provide are aligned with survivors' goals and needs. It is also paramount to provide survivors with the opportunity to provide input on the services they need to facilitate their housing goals.

Given the limited number of participants in this study, we grouped survivors and referred to them as Latina immigrant women. However, it is important to recognize that the women interviewed come from different countries in Latin America and their socio-political background is diverse. Further, their experiences in the US are undoubtedly impacted by the laws and policies towards immigrants specific to the region of the country they reside. Being aware and up to date regarding these factors helps contextualize survivors' experiences and needs and identify the barriers they may face when accessing services.

Another emerging theme is that survivors' migratory experiences may also impact their access to services. For example, their language needs, experiences of poverty, lack of documentation, and limited social support networks can be significant barriers for Latina immigrant survivors when accessing supportive services to address their needs. During the interviews, survivors narrated how these factors contribute to their experiences of landlord abuse and discrimination, and their difficulties navigating the country's multiple systems (including health, legal, housing, and immigration). These obstacles have been compounded in the last two years by the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic have affected those with several marginalized identities in transcendent ways. During the pandemic, rates of IPV increased (Boserup et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2021); thus, now more than ever, access to formal supportive services is crucial. Additional research studies are needed to further understand the impact of IPV on the lives of Latinx immigrant survivors during this period. Finding ways to reach these communities and tailor services to adequately respond to survivors' emerging needs is essential.

### The Importance of Language Justice when Providing Housing Services

Language justice refers to the right that every person has to express themselves in the language in which they feel most empowered and whole (Antena Aire, 2020). Given the experiences of abuse and risk that study participants mentioned, it is extremely important to emphasize that language should be a central consideration when offering housing services.

Language has a profound impact on services - It is through language that people understand the world around them, express their emotions and process their experiences (Antena Aire, 2020). Access to

services in survivors' preferred language is the most basic of language access obligations according to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Beyond access to materials in their preferred language, survivors must have access to culturally appropriate interpretation provided by interpreters who have strong community relationships to ensure that they understand survivors' perspectives, cultural references, customs, and traditions. This not only contributes to survivors' safety and confidence but offers providers a better understanding of survivors' needs.

## Access to Homeownership and Wealth Building Strategies

El sueño de toda familia es tener su **propia vivienda**.

*Every family's dream is to have their **own home**.*

-(P101)

Another emerging theme refers to the importance of having personal assets. All participants - without exception - shared that they aspire to own a home. Thus, service providers must engage in honest discussions with survivors about their goals and aspirations to ensure they provide the supportive services survivors seek and need.

Participants identified some of the obstacles they have faced when trying to purchase a home. One of the main barriers mentioned is the lack of knowledge regarding the process of purchasing property and any available financial aid resources in this country. As indicated in previous sections, the main limitation to accessing this information is the lack of contextually and culturally appropriate services in survivors' preferred language(s). Increasing access to culturally and contextually responsive services may also increase survivors' access to relevant information and resources that may help them build wealth and assets.

Although immigrants may obtain mortgages, bank loans, and savings and retirement accounts, unfortunately, there are organizations and financial service institutions that take advantage of people's limited knowledge, their circumstances, and even the urgency with which people need financial support. Therefore, it is important that housing services tailored for Latina immigrant survivors include information about available systems and resources. In so doing, survivors will not only have a clearer understanding of the resources available to them, but also of the risks and ways they can protect themselves from predatory services.

Access to culturally and contextually responsive housing services may prevent landlord abuse as well as empower survivors to feel in control of their finances and assets. It is critical for immigrant survivors to know that federal law protects immigrants from being discriminated against based on their immigration status or other identities (e.g., sexual orientation, race/ethnicity). Several states have created additional laws to protect immigrants from abuse, threats, and eviction by landlords. These laws determine the processes that a landlord must follow in order to terminate or change an existing housing lease. Knowing this may give Latinx immigrant survivors recourse to defend themselves against landlords taking advantage of their situation. Unfortunately, survivors identified that they do not always have access to the information and legal resources needed to initiate this type of process. Collaboration between DV/SA agencies and other organizations that can provide ancillary services, such as legal advice in participants' preferred language is crucial.

Latinx immigrant survivors also utilize some informal wealth-building strategies. For instance, some communities have co-created a community-based savings system. The members contribute to the

community fund monthly, and together they decide on a rotating schedule for collaborating members to receive the accrued amount periodically. These types of community-based strategies are born from within the community and can be very effective. Therefore, it is important for service providers to help establish or reestablish social support networks for Latinx immigrant survivors that would then facilitate these types of informal wealth-building strategies.

We conclude this report with some concrete recommendations and strategies to increase access to culturally and contextually responsive housing services for Latina immigrant survivors:

Recommendations	Strategies
<p><b>Identify survivors’ housing and service needs</b></p>	<p>Engage in conversations with survivors about their definitions of safe and stable housing</p> <hr/> <p>Consult survivors and other stakeholders (e.g., leaders, health workers) that are part of the local community and or may have strong community connections about other contextual realities and needs of the area where the organization is located</p> <hr/> <p>Train advocates and other service providers about the socio-political context of the communities to which the organization provides services</p> <hr/> <p>Establish relationships with organizations that can provide ancillary or collateral services to survivors</p>
<p><b>Provide culturally and contextually responsive supportive services</b></p>	<p>Train service providers and leadership teams regarding the cultural context of survivors accessing their services</p> <hr/> <p>Hire and adequately compensate staff that belong to the communities the organization typically serves or those who are familiar with the culture and context of survivors typically accessing services</p>
<p><b>Prioritize language justice when offering supportive services to Latina immigrant survivors</b></p>	<p>Develop an organization-wide language access plan</p> <hr/> <p>Identify key people and organizations that offer culturally and contextually responsive services and resources and that consider various language needs (e.g., domestic violence prevention organizations, health centers, mental health providers, legal services, members of the police)</p> <hr/> <p>Provide written materials, such as forms and informational pamphlets, in the preferred languages of survivors who generally access the organization’s supportive services</p>

## Recommendations

## Strategies

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Collaborate with people, organizations and/or co-ops that offer translation and interpretation services grounded in social and language justice

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### **Increase access to homeownership and wealth building strategies**

Offer workshops with trained community partners regarding the various resources and supportive services available for survivors interested in homeownership and wealth building

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Help establish and/or re-establish social support networks for Latina immigrant survivors

## Member Checks: Acrostic

The following poem was created to synthesize and present salient themes that emerged from this investigation. The first letter of each new line spells out the phrase 'Viviendo con Dignidad' (Living with Dignity), utilizing participants' verbatim statements.

The poem was shared with research participants and community partners during a member checking virtual session to help frame the conversation regarding study findings, report drafting, and dissemination efforts.



**V**ivienda digna, lo que toda familia desea.

**I**deal sería que cada persona tuviera su propio espacio pero

**V**enir a este país no es fácil, no es fácil.

**I**nformación valiosa para tener una vivienda estable

**E**s tan fundamental para el desarrollo emocional, físico, económico. Y que

**N**o falten los servicios básicos para poder

**D**ormir en las noches tranquilamente.

**O**pino que un hogar es donde una se sienta segura en todos los aspectos.

**C**oincidimos que ellas tienen un alma tan pura, un corazón tan grande.

**O**scuro el túnel donde yo estaba, pero ellas me sacaron de todo.

**N**os dan el respeto y nos dejan expresarnos, usar nuestra voz.

**D**iría que me sentiría segura al comprarme una casita, que fuera mía

**I**mportante es poder decir 'vivo en un lugar estable', no una

**G**ran casa, simplemente un lugar digno, donde mis

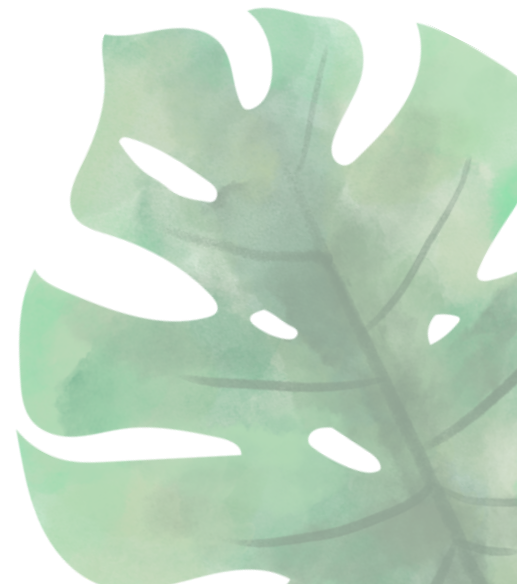
**N**iños estén felices y puedan jugar afuera sin miedo. Y así servirles de

**I**nspiración para que ellos nunca se den por vencidos.

**D**e aquí ya no nos vamos a mover,

**A**quí vamos a estar

**D**onde podemos vivir en paz.



## Translated Acrostic

Dignified housing, what every family wants.  
Ideally, each person would have their own space, but  
Coming to this country is not easy, it is not easy.  
Valuable information to have a stable home  
Is so fundamental for emotional, physical, economic growth. And to have  
Basic utilities to be able to sleep peacefully at night.  
I believe that a home is where one feels safe in every sense of the word.

We all agree that they have such a pure soul, such a big heart.  
I found myself in a dark tunnel, but they got me out of it.  
They respect us and let us express ourselves, use our voice.

I would say I would feel safe if I bought myself a house that was mine  
It is important to be able to say 'I live in a stable place,' not a  
Big house, simply a decent place, where my  
Children are happy and can play outside without being afraid. And that way,  
Inspire them to never give up.  
We are not going to move from here  
We will be here,  
A place where we can live in peace.

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