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DIVERSITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CALIFORNIA

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In the spring of 2021, IGS launched a two-year Diversity and Entrepreneurship Fellowship as part of the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship program. Now in year two, IGS and the Matsui Center are proud to showcase students' original research on the challenges and opportunities facing women- and POC-owned small businesses and diverse entrepreneurs in California. This series includes op-eds, blog posts, policy briefs and other research products. Learn more at <https://igs.berkeley.edu/matsui-center/fellowships/cal-in-sacramento>.

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Resilience Amidst COVID-19 Shut-Downs and Stigma: Experiences of Bay Area Asian Female Nail and Hair Salon Workers and Owners

Michelle Yiu

More than two years since COVID-19's initial outbreak, California's nail and hair salons are still recovering. Throughout most of 2020, salons were [shut down](#) due to [shelter-in-place orders](#). Moreover, Governor Newsom [alleged](#) that the state's first COVID-19 community transmission occurred in a nail salon, damaging the reputation of an industry [dominated by Asian female immigrants](#) and further inciting [anti-Asian hate](#).

Accordingly, the Asian female beauty salon workforce endured a [“triple COVID-19 toll”](#) of financial hardship, anti-Asian discrimination, and the virus itself.

Overall, the salon workforce suffered extensive financial stress spurred by the shut-downs and loss of clientele upon reopening. “Our budget was tight. We didn't buy anything outside of food or paying rent—only the necessities,” said Kelly*, a nail technician in Daly City.

Furthermore, COVID-19 prompted [lifestyle changes](#) that reduced clientele for salons. Lisa, a nail salon owner in Pacifica, explained, “People work from home now and they're not going out.” Natalie, a hair stylist in San Francisco, lost half of her clientele as people moved away or opted for salons closer to home instead of workplaces. The few clients that remained chose lower-cost services. “A lot of clients stopped coloring their hair—they're growing their gray hair out. That's good for them, but bad for me, because I don't see them anymore—only for haircuts,” said Natalie.

While some successfully applied for governmental financial relief, like [Paycheck Protection Program \(PPP\) loans](#) and [Unemployment Insurance \(UI\)](#), practically all faced barriers within the process, including lack of language access, digital literacy, and required paperwork.

Some owners who were sole proprietors or operated cash-only businesses ran into further complications. “I applied for PPP, but it didn't go through because I have no payroll, we get paid in cash, and no employees are under me,” said Pam, a hair salon owner in San Francisco. Others chose not to apply at all because it was too confusing and burdensome or they didn't even know assistance was available.

Despite these challenges, salon workers and owners were able to survive by making house calls, relying on family ties, and digging into savings. “We went off-the-record to clients' homes because we had no alternatives,” said Pam.

Multiple people also expressed that the uptick in COVID-19-related anti-Asian sentiment alarmed them both inside and outside their workplaces. “People treat me like I'm a virus—you

can tell with their body language, they don't want to be anywhere near me," said Angela, a nail salon worker in San Ramon.

Others felt lonely from social isolation and anxious from constantly maintaining COVID-19 prevention protocols. "It was very exhausting mentally," said Natalie, "I couldn't do anything without masks. And it's difficult—having to work and talk to clients all day long in a mask."

Organizations like the [California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative \(CHNSC\)](#) sought to meet the needs of the community, checking in with over 350 nail salon workers and owners one-on-one and providing them with PPE and one-time stipends. "Nail salon workers so used to interacting with their customers that being at home for so long was extremely hard. We wanted to provide them support during this tough time," said Vu, CHNSC's Program Manager. "So we reached out to them and made sure they knew we're here for them."

Financially, [California's Small Business Centers \(SBCs\)](#) like the [National Asian American Coalition \(NAAC\)](#) provided small businesses in low-income communities with microloans and business technical assistance workshops. "Being Asian ourselves, we understand the culture, and we know that there might be a lot of cash coming into the business that may not be reflected in their books," said Daughlet, NAAC's microlending advisor. "We get that, and we work with them through that."

While salons have been back in business for over a year, they are still largely operating in the red. "We are not stable at all," says Pam. "We're hoping to get back to 100%, but it's only hope. Who knows, right?"

Clearly, more must be done, including the following policy changes recommended by salon workers and owners:

- Streamline and improve awareness and accessibility of financial assistance resources
- Provide financial incentives for implementing improved ventilation/sanitation systems
- Create more financial assistance pathways for sole proprietors and cash-only businesses
- Support trainings on business technical assistance, workers' rights, and health and safety protocols
- Invest in community organizations and SBCs working with communities on-the-ground
- Continue addressing anti-Asian discrimination and violence

Although California's Asian female salon workforce has remained resilient throughout the COVID-19 shut-downs and anti-Asian stigma, we must continue to support their complete recovery.

**Names of beauty salon workers and owners were changed to protect identities.*