

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Brazil

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This briefing outlines the migration context in Brazil and provides an overview of the vulnerabilities and heightened inequalities experienced by women engaged in international mobilities in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Migration to Brazil

Over the last decade, Brazil's position in the global dynamics of migration has shifted significantly. From the 1930s to the 1980s, there was a balance between migrants entering and leaving the country, which began to change during the mid-1980s, when the number of Brazilians abroad increased substantially. Reduced labour market opportunities and the prospect of social mobility, particularly for the middle classes, have fed the emigration flux. However, between 2010 and 2020, the dynamics of migratory flows to Brazil changed the country's place in the scenario of global migration. There was an increase in the flows from countries of the Global South, making Brazil a destination country. While mobilities to the country until the beginning of the 2000s were mostly marked by the presence of migrants from the Global North, in the last decade, Haitians, Venezuelans, Bolivians, Senegalese, Congolese, Angolans, Cubans, Bengalis, Syrians and Pakistani nationals, among others, have represented the main nationalities arriving to Brazil (Tonhati et al., 2022). While between 2010 and 2015 there was an increase in diverse global immigration flows, in the second half of the decade (2015-2020), South American migration became more extensive, influenced by the migration of Haitians, Venezuelans, Paraguayans, Argentinians and Bolivians. The most prevalent nationality in the migration records by 2020 was Venezuelan, with 162,503 records, followed by Haitians (135,828), Bolivians (134,511), North-Americans (83,426) and Argentinians (72,963).

In March 2020, the Federal Police database estimated that 1,504,736 international migrants, representing 0.7% of the total population, were living in Brazil. Of these, 550,161 (36.6%)

were women. These official numbers, however, leave out undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. By the end of 2020, 57,099 people had been recognised as refugees, of which 62% were men and 37% women (OBMigra, 2020). Venezuelan nationals were the largest group of people who obtained refugee status in Brazil between 2011 and 2020, representing 86% of all refugees. Syrians, on the other hand, made up 7% of refugees and Congolese from the DRC represented 2% of the refugees (OBMigra, 2021). Nevertheless, the total number of refugees in Brazil is small when compared to the other nations in the region. While between 2011 and 2019 the number of asylum claims grew almost constantly, in 2020, there was a sharp decrease in applications, lower than that observed in 2017 (OBMigra, 2021).

The annual number of registrations of foreign-born nationals shows a substantial increase in 2019, especially due to the regularisation of Venezuelan nationals. There was a significant drop in 2020 with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. By that year, most migrants were concentrated in the cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Boa Vista. In 2019, Haitian and Venezuelans represented 48% of formally employed migrants. Most were located in the Southeast and Southern regions (São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul) and the majority were aged between 20 and 40 years old (Hallak Neto and Simões, 2020).

Finally, there are substantially more Brazilian emigrants than international migrants living in Brazil. The Brazilian community abroad exceeded 4.2 million in 2020, which represented an increase of more than 600,000 since 2018 (OBMigra, 2021). The most significant concentrations are in the United States (1,775,000), Portugal (276,200), Paraguay (240,000), United Kingdom (220,000) and Japan (211,138).

The immigration system in Brazil

In the context of the new migration flows, Brazil has created and updated its migration regulations and policies (Tonhati et al., 2022), to reflect the demands of migratory movements and

migrant organisations. On 24th May 2017, a new Migration Law (Law No. 13,445/2017) replaced Law No. 6,815/1980, “Estatuto do Estrangeiro” (Foreigner Statute Law), which provided very limited possibilities for the regularisation of migrants and saw them as a threat to national security. Experts and policymakers consider the new Migration Law as an advancement from the perspective of mobility as a human right. This legislation establishes the provision of humanitarian visas in specific situations, the expansion of migrants’ options for regularisation and the decriminalisation of “irregular” entry and stay in the country (Presidência da República, 2017). However, a national policy directed towards migrants has not accompanied this legislative change. The Brazilian Refugee Law (Lei No. 9,474/1997) is another important regulation instrument. It foresees the participation of the civil society in the promotion of refugees’ rights, the issuing of Brazilian documents to asylum seekers and allows them to work legally. The Refugee Law is seen by the Brazilian government and third sector actors as a progressive law, but its implementation has faced many challenges.

The far-right government that ruled Brazil up to 1st January 2023 did not implement a policy to match the 2017 legislative change. The new progressive government led by President Lula has introduced on 7th February 2023 the General Coordination of Migratory Policy in the Ministry of Justice (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública, 2023). The new Migration Law of 2017 did not change the historical view of the “desirable migrant” as someone skilled, from the Global North and needed in the labour market, nor did it necessarily improve migrants’ lives in Brazil. The welfare needs of migrants in Brazil go beyond the scope of the new legislation. Migrants’ movements and organisations have highlighted the need for policies that guarantee access to education, health services and improved labour conditions. There is also a need to tackle the racism and xenophobic violence experienced by many negatively racialised migrants in Brazil (Tonhati et al., 2022).

Brazil’s policies regarding migrant rights are created and administrated by municipalities. In recent years, cities like São Paulo, Florianópolis

and Caxias do Sul have created municipal policies. São Paulo’s Municipal Policy is based on the Municipal Law n° 16,478/2016 and includes rights of accessing social assistance programs, access to documentation, universal access to healthcare, decent work, housing programs and education. This policy also includes actions directed towards the protection of women and LGBTQI population in situations of violence, guaranteeing reproductive and mental health rights, the right to marriage and protection against racism and LGBTQI phobia (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2016). The creation of these policies, however, has not triggered changes in national legislation or the desire to design a national policy during the last Brazilian government. At federal level, the priority was directed towards managing the “emergency operation” of new population inflows rather than establishing an actual policy for migrants. An example is the “Operação Acolhida” (“Operation Welcome”), designed by the Brazilian government and managed by the Brazilian military forces. The plan was created in 2018 with the aim of getting the Brazilian border with Venezuela “back in order” and to expand temporary shelters in camps for migrants. Under this scheme, the migrants’ camps in the state of Roraima have been managed by the Federal Government and UNHCR. At its highest point, there were 12 camps in the cities of Boa Vista and Pacaraima, assisting 500 migrants in Pacaraima and 3,465 in Boa Vista (OBMigra, 2020). Currently, with the decrease in the entrance of migrants through the northern border, mainly due to the pandemic, but also due to the political and economic crisis in the country, the operation is gradually reducing its activities. Its implementation, however, resembles a security operation rather than a migration policy, given its main objective of managing borders and containing mobilities.

COVID-19 and rising inequalities

Recent data on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil indicates that the health emergency has deepened the inequalities that have marked for a long time the living conditions of many migrants in the country. Public policies adopted during the pandemic did not consider the specific needs of migrants and

the inequalities at the intersections of gender, race, class and nationality. In addition to the unequal access to health provision, there was a deepening of gender and racial inequalities in the labour market. At the same time, migrants' access to documents confirming their migration status was restricted by the closure of administrative services. This closure of services has unequally affected different nationalities. There was also reported intensification of discrimination and violence against migrants.

On 18th March 2020, a Federal Ordinance imposed measures to restrict displacement across borders, specifically the entry of Venezuelan people by land into the Brazilian territory, which discriminated against this group of migrants, as other groups could still enter the country. In July 2020, tourists were still allowed in the country if arriving by air, while land and water borders remained closed, preventing asylum seekers arriving by land from entering the country. In addition, in 2020, the total number of deportations reached 1,005, an increase of 969% compared to the previous year (OBMigra, 2020).

In 2020, once the COVID-19 pandemic was declared an emergency, there was a decrease of about 50% in work documents issued to migrants. The decrease was more significant among women migrants applying for temporary permits (55% decrease), compared to the impact on male migrants (24% decrease) (Tonhati et al., 2022). This decrease was the result of border closures and the closure of administrative services. The Federal Police services were suspended indefinitely, and deadlines for migrants' regularisation were extended. However, a large number of migrants became undocumented during this time. The restrictions to migrants' regularisation also meant that many were ineligible for economic aid provided by the federal government, the so-called "emergency aid". The aid was considered an "exceptional measure of social protection" to which people in economic vulnerability were entitled (Presidência da República Secretaria-Geral, 2021). The funds were aimed at those suddenly unemployed and low-income families. Undocumented migrants, however, remained ineligible, since any claimants needed to show Brazilian documentation to

qualify for the benefit. It is important to note that the Migration Law stipulates that undocumented migrants have access to the same benefits and social programs as Brazilians. However, while many migrants and asylum seekers applied for the financial aid, only very few received it (Magalhães et al., 2021).

The Brazilian legislation provides healthcare as a universal service. Migrants' access to health services is also stipulated in national and municipal regulations as a right, regardless of one's migration status. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of documentation prevented many migrants from accessing vaccination and health assistance. In a survey of 2,475 migrants in São Paulo, only 84 said they had sought care via the National Health System (Fernandes et al., 2020). In addition, as nationality was not recorded in death certificates and Hospitalisation Authorisation (AIH), it is impossible to estimate the number of migrants directly affected by COVID-19 or who died (Magalhães et al., 2021). The already limited access to healthcare for migrants who worked in slaughterhouses in southern Brazil, mostly Venezuelans and Haitians, was intensified with the pandemic. The number of slaughterhouse workers infected by COVID-19 represented one third of the total population that was diagnosed with the disease in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, making these environments massive sources of virus spread (Pina, 2020).

The situation of domestic workers during the pandemic is another example in terms of the differential effects on socially vulnerable populations. The first death recorded in the country due to the SARS-COV2 virus was a female domestic worker, who got the virus from her employers, who became infected while traveling to Italy. At federal level, domestic work was not classified as "essential" activity, however, decrees issued in different Brazilian states did consider domestic workers as essential workers (Ferrito and Maeda, 2020). Female workers (92%) significantly dominate domestic work in Brazil, with only 32% of them regularised. Although there are not official records on the total number of international migrants in domestic work, it is well known that these are mainly women from

the Philippines, Bolivia and Haiti, who were suffering from abusive work conditions even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Câmara dos Deputados, 2018). Many domestic workers had to continue and work throughout the pandemic, which made them one of the most vulnerable categories in economic terms and from a health perspective (Pizzinga, 2021).

Many migrants were more exposed to the risks of contracting COVID-19 due to their precarious housing conditions, their work in essential services which continued without the adoption of any healthcare measures, and their work in the informal economy. As a result, while the virus initially reached the richest layers of the population which experience greater global mobility, it then spread more dramatically among the most vulnerable populations in the cities. The sharing of housing between several families of migrants in overcrowded places was also a factor that made social distancing practices impossible (Granada et al., 2021). In 2021, the Federal Supreme Court voted on the suspension of the evictions and removals of vulnerable people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after, a federal law also prohibited evictions. Despite this, evictions continued during the most critical moments of the pandemic. According to a survey, almost 22,000 families had been evicted between March 2020 and August 2021, increasing the number of evictions during the pandemic by 340% (Despejo Zero, 2020). As a result, many migrant families became homeless. These were already existing problems which had been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There remains a lack of policies to tackle the social inequalities that affect migrants based on social class, gender, race and national origin. In recent years, in the context of a far-right government, Brazil has experienced the dismantling of welfare policies, increasing institutionalised violence and the rise of a nationalist and anti-migration narrative. In 2019, the government announced Brazil's withdrawal from the Global Compact for Migration, the UN first-ever global agreement on a common approach to international migration and migrants, integration, and, in the same year, Ordinance No. 666 allowed the removal and restriction

of entry of foreign nationals considered "dangerous". During the COVID-19 health emergency, Brazil experienced a serious rise in reports of xenophobic and racist violence against migrants, especially those seen as "non-white" and originally from more disadvantaged nations, even leading to murders. In May 2020, João Manuel, an Angolan immigrant, was murdered in a neighborhood of São Paulo, after an argument over the payment of the emergency aid for migrants. In December 2020, Falilatou Sarouna, a Togolese worker residing in São Paulo, was arrested without evidence and arbitrarily detained for six months. In January 2022, Moïse Kabagambe, a Congolese refugee in Brazil, was beaten and killed in daylight, in Rio de Janeiro. Just a few days later, a Venezuelan migrant was shot and died in Mauá, in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo. Marcelo Caraballo, 21, was killed by the owner of the property where he lived, because of a debt of R\$100 /20 US dollars.

There has also been a significant increase in institutional violence, with xenophobic, racist and gendered biases impacting recruitment and treatment of migrant workers by their employers and state authorities. In March 2021, the Federal Police, armed with weapons and hoods, raided a religious shelter for Venezuelan migrants in the city of Pacaraima, where more than 50 women and children were living. There has also been an increase in the cases of racism against Chinese people, with SARS-COV2 being labelled a "Chinese virus" and Chinese people blamed for the spread of the virus. Representatives of the federal government also promoted these discourses.

COVID-19 and migrant women in Brazil

In Brazil, labour markets are strongly segmented in relation to race, gender and class. Before the pandemic, women represented 30% of migrants in formal employment. North American women represented 41% of migrants in the formal labour market, and South American women made up 35%. The Central American and Caribbean migrants were the third largest group, at 26%. Only among migrants coming from African countries there were more female than male migrant workers (Tonhati and Macedo, 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of migrant women in formal employment in Brazil were between 20 and 39 years old, had a high school level of education, and came from countries such as Haiti, Venezuela, Cuba, and Paraguay. Migrant women were mostly working in cleaning, services and slaughterhouses and those with the highest incomes were mostly from the Global North. However, on average, they earned 50% less than migrant men. While Black migrants represent 57% of all registered workers, they have continued to earn much lower incomes than non-Black migrants. White North American migrants in Brazil can earn 11 times more than Black Central American or Caribbean migrants (Hallak Neto and Simões, 2020). Racism remains one of the main difficulties faced in the labour market (Tonhati et al., 2022).

After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of unemployed migrants rose from 58% to 81%. While men with lowest education levels were less impacted, as they were employed by agriculture, meatpacking and slaughterhouses, women and people with higher education were the most likely to become unemployed. The sectors that employ mostly migrant women- cleaning, food services, retail and market selling, and administrative sectors- were the ones where unemployment rose sharply (Tonhati and Macedo, 2020). The meatpacking sector, which hires mostly men, employed more migrants than it fired in 2020, while the restaurant sector, which employs mainly women, employed 46% fewer immigrants than in the previous year (Cavalcanti and Oliveira, 2020). Employment up to June 2020 was 27% lower for women than it had been in 2019, and 16% lower for men. Thus, the effects of the pandemic on the formal labour market were proportionally more significant for migrant women than migrant men (Tonhati and Macedo, 2020). Policies that offered state support to the economic sector were also more favorable for sectors that employ migrant men. At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the federal government announced economic measures that favored agribusinesses- a sector that employs a significant portion of Venezuelan and Haitian migrant men. The service sector, largely made up of small and medium-sized

businesses and dominated by women workers, was disadvantaged (Câmara dos Deputados, 2021).

While data shows that women had more access to emergency aid than men, women were more significantly affected by economic precarities in the home. There was also a greater burden on women regarding domestic and care activities. For migrant women, many of whom worked in the informal economy, the insecurity of work intensified (Borges et al., 2020). Migrant women are often the main source of family income and the main caregivers for their children or elder parents left behind. With COVID-19, many had difficulties in sending remittances for family members in their country of origin, with consequences for their families' wellbeing, also for women's own mental health.

Evidence also confirms a significant rise in domestic violence in Brazil during the pandemic. The police attendance to cases of domestic violence raised by 45% in the São Paulo state, while murders of women raised by 46% (FBSP, 2020). Women were also at disadvantage in terms of access to healthcare and organisations working with migrant groups have long denounced practices of exclusion and discrimination suffered by women migrants through health services, in particularly regarding cases of obstetric violence. Brazil emerged as the country with the highest number of maternal deaths due to COVID-19 with a fatality rate of 7% for this group, more than double the fatality rate for the country at that time, which was at under 3% for the general population (Fiocruz, 2021).

Conclusion

This briefing has overviewed some of the emergent and heightened inequalities experienced by women engaged in international mobilities in Brazil in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants' lives in Brazil need to be considered in a migratory context marked by South-South fluxes of population, with the predominance of migrants arriving from mostly negatively racialised, impoverished countries.

Race, class and gendered biases, evident in the incorporation of migrants in the labour market and in their access to health and education services, have had significant effects in the lives of the most vulnerable migrants, particularly women. These effects should be considered in the context of existing migrant and refugee laws in Brazil, but also in the absence of a national framework that could guarantee the application of the law and give particular attention to gender and race inequalities.

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