

# The COVID-19 pandemic and labour market inequalities experienced by migrants in Brazil

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed new challenges for migrants in Brazil and made even more visible the intersectional inequalities, vulnerabilities and violence migrants were experiencing. The far-right government that ruled Brazil during the pandemic emergency refused at first to acknowledge the WHO recommendations on disease prevention and control, failing to implement containment measures and delaying the purchase of vaccines. Disease prevention remained in the hands of states and municipal governments that had different views on how to implement physical distancing and lockdowns. Brazil had a very high rate of contamination and deaths before vaccinations commenced, with the number of deaths recorded (697,663) disproportionately high to population size.

Women and children were particularly at risk. Brazil had the highest number of maternal deaths reported due to COVID-19 at 7% for this group, more than double the death rate of 3% recorded among general population (Fiocruz, 2021). It also recorded a fifth of all deaths among children under five (Taylor, 2022). The closure of childcare facilities and schools affected mainly vulnerable female migrants, who were already experiencing inequalities and difficulties entering the formal labour market.

In this briefing, we examine the effects of the COVID-19 related measures on migrant women's access to the labour market and their experiences of work and access to work-related financial support during the pandemic.

## Labour conditions of migrants in Brazil during COVID-19

In Brazil, the COVID-19 health emergency came at a time of an already significant economic crisis, with considerable impacts on migrant workers in different sectors. According to data from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNADC/IBGE), in 2020, Brazil had 10.1 million unemployed people, representing 9.3% of the total population. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, the unemployment rate reached 14.9% in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, the highest value recorded since 2012 and an increase of 3.9% compared to the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2019 (IBGE, 2015). Among the migrant population in formal work, there was a reduction of 60% of newly employed migrants in April 2020, compared to the same month in 2019, while the number of people losing their employment also increased (Tonhati et al., 2022).

Access to the labour market and permanence in work, low pay, particularly in the case African migrants and women are ongoing challenges for many migrants in Brazil (Tonhati and Macedo, 2020), especially when taking into account the absence of specific protection policies for these groups. The racism experienced by many migrants cannot be separated from the legacy of the country's long process of enslavement, which has consequences to the present day. As Carneiro (2003) points out, the history of slavery and the colonial violations perpetrated in Brazil are at the base of the construction of national identity and the structuring of myths, such as that of "racial democracy", which presupposes the existence of harmonious racial relations in the country. Under the idea that, due to miscegenation, the social order in Brazil is democratic and peaceful, several racial, class and gender hierarchies have remained intact in social life, nourishing structures of oppression and inequalities present in various areas, such as the labour market. These intersections activate inequalities, reinforcing violence, exclusion processes and exploitation dynamics that affect some social groups in particular such as immigrants and refugees (McClintock, 2010).

Migrant workers in Brazil face significant difficulties in relation to the validation of their qualifications, which prevents many of them from working in occupations commensurate with their level of education and training. In the case of women, other factors are also at play. As Tonhati and Macedo (2020) point out, although data from RAIS-CTPS-CAGED show that there has been an absolute increase in the participation of migrant women in the formal labour market in recent years, this workforce is not completely absorbed. For this group, the high rate of dismissals, the low employment rate and the constant instability in the formal market remain key concerns. These issues are evident when analysing the data on the presence of immigrants in the Brazilian formal labour market in the last decade. With more participation in specific sectors such as cleaning activities and the retail and restaurant sectors, migrant women earn wages that are 70% lower than their male counterparts, in addition to being the majority among the unemployed (Cavalcanti et al., 2021).

Inequalities are also present when considering other aspects, such as migrants' region of origin, given that, according to data compiled and analysed by *Observatório das Migrações Internacionais*, immigrants from the Global North have higher incomes than those from the Global South. In relation to racial aspects, migrants seen as white, mainly from European countries, receive considerably higher wages than migrants perceived as black. Inequalities are also present when these aspects intersect with factors such as migration status and age, as refugees and asylum seekers generally have lower incomes, while young migrants tend to get lower wages compared to the 40 to 65 years old age group (Cavalcanti et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, labour market inequalities intensified. Some sectors of economic activity were more affected, as the restrictions prevented or hindered their functioning, such as shops and restaurants, which recorded 46% fewer immigrant admissions in the first half of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (Cavalcanti et al., 2020). In other activities considered as essential, the

impact was also substantial, but transitory, especially in the case of services that could not be executed remotely. It should be noted that many activities considered "essential", such as care or food processing, require lower education levels and pay lower wages. These are also work sectors occupied by many migrant workers, and predominantly women in some cases. As Fernandes and Baeninger (2020) point out, the agribusiness sector was one of the least impacted during the pandemic. This sector, however, employs mainly migrants in Brazil, mainly for work in meatpacking and slaughterhouses, in jobs that stand out for their precariousness, low wages and risk of occupational accidents (Granada et al., 2021). The slaughterhouses were also the epicentre of outbreaks of COVID-19 (G1, 2020), leaving migrant workers more exposed to contamination and death from the virus.

It is important to highlight that the labour market is still very gendered in Brazil (Hirata, 2016), which affects the migratory trajectories of many women. Many migrant women work in positions linked to "care", either as nannies or as caregivers for the elderly, or in the domestic work. Over the last decade, Haitian and Venezuelan women were the highest groups of workers entering the Brazilian formal job market, many working in the cleaning sector (Tonhati and Macedo, 2020). Although domestic employment was not formally considered an essential activity at national level, some cities, such as Belém/PA issued decrees against the national guidance (Sandes, 2020). The measure was criticised by the Public Ministry of Labour and by civil society organisations and was later revoked. Domestic work however was not completely stopped during the pandemic, putting migrant women at greater risk of contagion and death. Unsurprisingly, the first death by COVID-19 recorded in Brazil in March 2020 was of a female domestic worker, who contracted the virus from her employer.

Despite the fact that specific laws, such as the Constitutional Amendment No. 72/2013 and the Complementary Law No. 150/2015, regulate domestic work, many migrant women work informally, without contracts or access to rights, on low wages and doing long unregulated hours.

Cases of work analogous to slavery are also common, as well as situations of discrimination, gender-based violence and labour exploitation, which intensified during the pandemic and affected women in intersectional ways (Rossi and Locatelli, 2020). Women were burdened by unpaid domestic work and caring for children and other dependents as a result of the closure of daycare centres and schools. The social constructions of gender operate, in this case, in such ways that these activities are performed by women and, with children and adolescents not attending school, many mothers found themselves fully responsible for their children's education and care. This forced many women to decide between employment and care duties, at a time of increasing concern for their own health and wellbeing.

Gender inequalities and precarious labour conditions were also present in other sectors relying on migrants. According to the IBGE databases, migrant men tend to receive a minimum wage for their work in this sector, while women are concentrated in the income bracket below the minimum wage (Oliveira and Oliveira, 2020). Furthermore, despite the fact that the majority of the employed migrant population is composed of men (69%), the degree of informality is higher among women (44%), especially those aged between 20 and 29 years (Oliveira and Oliveira, 2020). Without work documents, many migrant women work without an agreed fixed income in the informal economy, which was severely impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the closure of non-essential industries. This was the case of migrants working in the culture sector or the production and sale of handcrafts, which is reliant on organised fairs and events which were cancelled or subject to social distancing measures. This endangered the income of many migrant women. For many who had lost employment, changes to another sector required new documentation which they could not apply for, as many public services dealing with migrants' regularisation were also shut during the pandemic.

## Migration and labour policies during the COVID-19 pandemic

In terms of migration-related policies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian government issued more than 30 ordinances aimed at closing the borders. Many of these established different restrictions on certain flows, such as those aimed at Venezuelan arrivals which were stopped (Portaria nº 120/2020), and types of borders, with limitations on entry by land, while air and water borders remained open. These measures, adopted under the justification of health priorities, were not in accordance with Brazil's migration and refugee legislation (Law No. 13.445/2017 and Law No. 9.474/1997), showing thus the random actions against immigration adopted by the government (Leão and Fernandes, 2020).

In relation to work and income, the federal government implemented measures such as the Emergency Employment and Income Maintenance Program (Provisional Measure nº 936/2020), which allowed companies to reduce the salary and working hours of their employees, or temporarily suspend work contracts (Coraccini, 2021). Furthermore, the main policy adopted in this period was the implementation of *Auxílio Emergencial* (Emergency Aid). Effective between April 2020 and October 2021<sup>1</sup>, the program granted a financial benefit for R\$600 to the unemployed, informal workers, self-employed and individual micro-entrepreneurs. The Brazilian Federal Constitution and the Migration Law guarantee the access of migrants to social benefits and public services, regardless of their documentation or migration status. In this sense, migrants were able to access the aid, but they faced several barriers preventing many from receiving this benefit. In addition to barriers such as language, lack of knowledge of Brazilian legislation and procedural bureaucracy, cases of xenophobia were recorded in bank branches, agencies and public spaces. The violence, which intensified during the pandemic, culminated in the death of João Manoel, an Angolan resident in São Paulo, who was stabbed by a Brazilian man after an argument over the Emergency Aid (Capomaccio, 2020). Bureaucratic barriers also significantly affected migrants. At the beginning

of the pandemic, in order to request the aid, migrants had to validate their CPF (Individual Person's Card) in person at the Federal Revenue offices, which required them to show the document that proved their migration status. Many local Federal Revenue offices, however, were working remotely or were closed. Once documents were validated, individuals would require a bank account so that they could withdraw the aid money, which many did not have (La Rosa et al., 2020).

For migrants in irregular work, the process was even more difficult. Due to social distancing guidelines, Federal Police – the body responsible for documenting procedures for immigrants and refugees – suspended face-to-face appointments and extending the deadlines for the regularisation of overdue documents. However, many public services did not accept expired documentation, preventing migrants from withdrawing the emergency aid money and reinforcing situations of socioeconomic vulnerability (Martuscelli, 2020).

In the face of numerous obstacles and challenges, civil society organisations and migrant women collectives organised actions and campaigns to support those most in need. In addition to the #RegularizaçãoJá campaign, which involved more than 20 organisations focused on the issue of migration and demanded the regularisation of undocumented migrants in Brazil, letters related to preventing access to emergency aid were issued to the state bank and to the Federal Revenue Service (Prefeitura Do Município São Paulo, 2020). In different parts of the country, groups of migrant women also held virtual meetings to discuss issues such as domestic violence, campaign for food donations and carry out virtual marketing for products made by migrants. Several organised the so-called “vaquinhas”, fundraising campaigns for migrants who lost their jobs during the pandemic and/or who were in a situation of vulnerability (Villalón et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

As Hankivsky and Cormier (2022) argue, “an intersectionality informed analysis points to the relationship and indeed interdependence between these and other social locations and

why these should be front and center in any effective affirmative action program” (p.218). In the case of Brazil, government actions during the pandemic were mainly ad-hoc and arbitrary, without careful consideration on their unintended consequences. There was a lack of joint working between different sectors in the absence of policies that considered the specificities of population needs, particularly in relation to national origin and migration status, gender and race.

In Brazil, there is a gap between legislation and the constitutional guarantees regarding international migrants and the policies implemented by government institutions. The existing body of evidence shows how intersectional inequalities affect international migrants, particularly those from the Global South, placing them in vulnerable positions, especially if they are women. The power relations and the social orders of patriarchy and racism that still characterise the structures in which political decisions are made have hindered intersectional policies that could alter these inequalities. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, rising unemployment and social vulnerability, civil society initiatives often stood out. It is necessary, however, to articulate these actions with the public power, so that effective, intersectional and inter-institutional public policies can be implemented *for* and *with* the migrant population.

**The GEN-MIGRA Project is jointly funded under the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities (T-AP). Bringing together researchers and practitioners from four countries- Brazil, Germany, Poland and United Kingdom- it researches the impact of the pandemic on migrant women and their families. Find out more at: [www.genmigra.org](http://www.genmigra.org)**

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> With the end of emergency aid, the government implemented the so-called *Auxílio Brasil*, a financial benefit that replaced Bolsa Família, an income transfer program that had been in place since 2003.

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[Please note all web links were available at the time of publication, in May 2023.]



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