GEN-MIGRA
GENDER, MOBILITIES AND MIGRATION

GEN-MIGRA:
Gender, mobilities and migration during and post COVID-19 pandemic - vulnerability, resilience and renewal

Gender, inequalities, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of migrant and refugee women in Brazil and of Brazilian women in Portugal: Project main findings

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Our project and how we produced the evidence for this briefing

GEN-MIGRA was a research project that explored the lived experiences of international migrant women and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic in four countries -the United Kingdom, Brazil, Poland and Germany. In addition, it considered the experiences of Brazilian women in Portugal. The collaboration was funded through the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Humanities and Social Sciences.

The team included researchers from the University of Strathclyde (Scotland, UK), University of Dortmund (Germany), the State University of Campinas (Brazil) and the Jagellonian University (Poland). In Brazil, the project was supported by FAPESP – Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo.

The aim of the project was to consider migrant women's experiences of inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic and throughout the post-pandemic period. Researchers in each country collected interview data from stakeholders such as government representatives and charities, community organizations and migrant women and their family members. The project examined the role of state policies and community networks in mitigating or increasing gender inequalities that were widely reported during the COVID-19 pandemic at a global level.

This report explores the experiences of migrant and refugee women living in Brazil during and after the pandemic and of Brazilian women in Portugal. The findings are based on interviews and ethnographic research carried out with 16 migration experts linked to different governmental bodies in Brazil, as well as 24 migrant women from 10 different countries living in São Paulo and 8 agents working in associations directed towards migrants and sex workers and 10 Brazilian women living in Portugal. An important part of the analysis is the result of observations made in various spaces dedicated to providing care to migrants and linked to the daily lives of these women. It draws exclusively on the data collected by the Brazil-based research team and shares key findings and recommendations produced from this analysis.

We aim to use this evidence to drive gender-responsive policy solutions to support women involved in international migration and their families, particularly those who are the most affected by social inequalities.

The GEN-MIGRA research data: Profile of participants in Brazil

During the project, 16 migration experts from different government bodies were interviewed in Brazil, as well as 24 migrant women from 10 different countries: Afghanistan (1), Angola (4), Bolivia (6), Cameroon (2), Egypt (1), Philippines (3), Guyana (1), Haiti (2), Democratic Republic of Congo (2), Syria (1) and Nigeria (1). Most of the interviewees were between 35 and 45 years old. Two of them were elderly, the oldest being 83 years old. Only two were under 30 years old. Most arrived in the country in the last 10 years. Only the eldest, from Cameroon, arrived in the mid-1990s.

Most of the interviewees had completed high school and some had completed higher education. Of the 24 migrants, 5 had completed higher education, 16 had completed the equivalent of high school and 3 had only completed elementary school. Among those with university education, we interviewed women with degrees in law, social sciences, psychology, administration and accounting. Their racial classification is quite difficult to map, considering their diverse origins. The 6 Bolivian women interviewed were of indigenous origin and racialized in the country based on their nationality and their work in the sewing networks. The interviewees from Angola, Cameroon, Guyana, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria identified as black women in Brazil, and it is common for them to state that this racialization was only produced and perceived after their arrival in the country.

In terms of family structure, the sample included 9 married women, 7 separated or divorced women, and 8 single women. 19 of them had children, and of these, 12 were single mothers. Domestic arrangements also varied, with just over half of the sample living with their children and/or other family members or sharing a house with other people. Most single mothers had children in the country, but other children remained in their countries of origin living with relatives. Two of the women were grandmothers.

Half of the women in the sample were self-employed without any employment record. Of these, 6 were registered and the others were looking for work. Regarding their immigration status, 7 were refugees, 10 were residents with children born in Brazil, 3 residents through the Mercosul agreement, 3 were asylum seekers, and 1 had a temporary humanitarian visa.

Key findings regarding international women migrants in Brazil

During the fieldwork, we addressed the economic, occupational, housing, and emotional consequences of the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, observing the strategies of migrant women and their responses to the different crises that impacted their trajectories. We also addressed broader social, political, and economic issues related to the pandemic in the country.

The key findings of the research in Brazil are:

Key Finding 1: Brazil did not have a national migration policy during the pandemic. Federal government priorities were predominantly oriented towards the regulation of migratory movements across land borders by military forces, accompanied by a substantial escalation in the number of deportations.

Key Finding 2: The documentation process for migrants decreased significantly in the period. The consequences of this reduction proved detrimental to migrants and asylum seekers, as it restricted migrants' access to economic aid, vaccines, and health services.

Key Finding 3: Race, gender, and national origin are crucial in understanding the insertion and permanence of migrants within the labour market during the pandemic. African migrants, particularly women, were disproportionately affected by instability and low wages in Brazil.

Key Finding 4: Situations of domestic violence, which have increased during the pandemic, have been accompanied by other violences considered to be equally damaging, if not more so, in women's migratory journeys. These include experiences of violence at borders and bureaucratic-state violence in the migratory context, permeated by racism and xenophobia.

Key Finding 5: In Brazil, the language of human rights protection invoked by regimes combating human trafficking has strengthened security measures that repress prostitution and the movement of migrants across borders, intensifying violence against them. In parallel, among migrants, poverty and scarcity of employment opportunities, in conjunction with the dynamics of affective, domestic, familial, and national arrangements, have given rise to circumstances that bear similarities to the practices of slave labour and human trafficking in the pandemic period.

Key Finding 6: Collectives of migrant women were a fundamental source of support during the pandemic, offering material aid and networks of affection and solidarity.

Key Finding 7: The post-pandemic period proved to be more challenging than the pandemic itself. Since the pandemic period was characterised by an increase in precariousness, migrant women, who were not mentioned in specific public policies, derived significant benefits from the universalist policies that were implemented during that period. The post-pandemic 'crisis' was marked by the intensification of poverty and violence.

Key Finding 1: Brazil did not have a national migration policy during the pandemic. Federal government priorities were predominantly oriented towards the regulation of migratory movements across land borders by military forces, accompanied by a substantial escalation in the number of deportations.

Research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil indicates that the health emergency has deepened the inequalities that have long marked the living conditions of the migrant population living in the country. This is because the measures needed to contain the virus have had their negative impacts intensified on the lives of populations that were already in a vulnerable situation before the outbreak of the pandemic.

The research points to the non-existent impact of policies on national legislation during the government until the end of 2022 and shows how its priorities were directed mainly at controlling migration by military forces. Furthermore, in 2020, the absolute number of deportations was 1,005. This represents an increase of 969.1% compared to the same period of the previous year, which indicates that deportations were a widely and deliberately used measure at that time (Oliveira; Cavalcanti; Macedo, 2021).

Under the pretext of the pandemic, Ordinance No. 615 of December 11, 2020 established measures to restrict population movement across borders. The ordinance specifically targeted the entry of Venezuelans into Brazilian territory by land, which constituted discriminatory treatment towards nationals of that country. In this sense, the federal government adopted different policies depending on the type of border – land or air, disproportionately affecting people of different nationalities and economic conditions. At the end of July 2020, tourists were allowed to enter by air, while land and water borders remained closed, preventing the entry of asylum seekers who did not have the resources to enter the country through the airports.

During the pandemic, the interviewees' transnational mobility was impacted mainly in terms of family reunions. However, this is a difficulty that they had already faced before the health emergency, indicating that, during the period, their difficulties in terms of mobility remained. In particular, the refugees and asylum seekers pointed out that their attempts to bring relatives and family members had to be postponed and that this fact, however, is not new. In our conversations, a pattern already observed in previous research (Ribeiro, 2021) was repeated, of persistent difficulties in issuing visas for residents of countries such as Angola, Nigeria and the DRC.

Of the interviewees, only one had her mobility plans significantly affected by the pandemic. Lina had been living in Rio de Janeiro since the World Cup was held in the city, when she worked in hospitality at major sporting events. She went to Bolivia for vacation and, on the very day she was preparing to return to Rio, the land borders were closed. She had to stay in Bolivia for 1 year, sewing masks and medical gowns with her sister. After that period, she decided to stay in São Paulo because the news from Rio, received through her friends, were discouraging. Everyone said there was no work. Lina's calculation was that living in São Paulo would bring more opportunities, especially in the sewing sector.

> *"I wasn't thinking about leaving Rio. I wanted to stay. I went to Bolivia on a visit, right, so I was thinking about going back and that's when the pandemic started. I bought my ticket to go back and that same day, that very date, they closed. I lost my ticket to go back, can you believe it? I couldn't get it, one day, I thought: "what am I going to do?". Not even the illegal buses, right, there weren't any, it was really crowded to go back. So I stayed there for a year and then I came back, after they opened, the first one I took, I came backand stayed here in São Paulo."* [Lina, Bolivia]

Key Finding 2: The documentation process for migrants decreased significantly in the period. The consequences of this reduction proved detrimental to migrants and asylum seekers, as it restricted migrants' access to economic aid, vaccines, and health services.

In 2020, with the onset of the pandemic, there was a reduction of almost 50% in migrant registrations (OBMIGRA, 2020). The drop was more intense among women seeking temporary registrations (a 55% drop) and the smallest impact was among resident men (a 24% drop) (Oliveira; Cavalcanti; Macedo, 2021). This drop was a result of the closure of land borders, but also of the total or partial closure of administrative services during the period. Federal Police services were suspended indefinitely and immigration regularization deadlines were extended. Meanwhile, a large number of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees remained undocumented.

The consequences of the reduction in registrations proved detrimental to migrants and asylum seekers, as it rendered them ineligible for Emergency Aid. Numerous migrants established in the country were unable to benefit from the economic assistance provided by the federal government during the pandemic. The aid was considered an "exceptional social protection measure" to which people in economic vulnerability would be entitled. Undocumented migrants, however, remained ineligible.

Many of our interviewees received emergency aid. All of them said that the money was very important for their survival during this period and supplemented their income at a time when demand for their services was decreasing (except for those who worked online). Only two of the interviewees who received the aid had not previously received ; the others already received it and had no problems withdrawing the emergency aid. Sandra had to deal with the difficulties at work and caring for her son alone, because her husband returned to Bolivia shortly before the pandemic. She says that it was the aid that allowed her to pay her rent and to avoid living on the streets at that time.

> *Sandra: Then everything stopped, work, everything, because the pandemic started, I thought, "What am I going to do now? Everything is over, there is no work, why did I send away the father of my daughters?" I told him: "Come here, help me, I have nothing to eat". He said: "No, I can't". I cried a lot. [...] I ended up making masks, I sewed. Then the government gave money to families, R$1,200.00, I was very happy, thank God, I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how I was going to pay the rent here...*
>
> *Jullyane: You got the aid easily, how did you get it, did anyone explain it to you?*
>
> *Sandra: Yes, because before I had Bolsa Família, then it came straight to me.* [Sandra, Bolivia]*

The COVID-19 pandemic has also presented new challenges for migrants in Brazil in terms of access to healthcare given that the federal government initially refused to acknowledge the severity of the pandemic and to follow WHO recommendations on disease prevention and control, refusing to implement containment measures and delaying the purchase of vaccines. Prevention of the virus remained in the hands of state and municipal governments, which had different views on how to implement physical distancing and lockdowns.

Women have also been at a disadvantage in terms of access to adequate healthcare services. Brazil had a very high rate of contamination and deaths before the start of vaccinations against COVID-19, with the number of registered deaths (697,663) disproportionately high for the size of the population. Women and children were particularly at risk. The country emerged with the highest number of maternal deaths from COVID-19 and a fatality rate of 7.2% for this population in June 2021, more than double the country's fatality rate at that time, which was 2.8% for the general population (Fiocruz, 2021).

* Bolsa Família is the name of a national social program of income distribution.

Among the women interviewed, the cases of contamination were not particularly remembered as dramatic. Many fell ill more than once and others stated that they had never caught the virus, and there was one who stated that she had not even been vaccinated, because she believed the denialist information at that time, which indicated that some people were supposedly immune to the virus. Overall, however, all the others had access to the vaccine and none presented more serious complications due to the virus. There were many cases of friends, neighbors and family members who had severe COVID or even died because of the disease, however, both in Brazil and abroad.

Key Finding 3: Race, gender, and national origin are crucial in understanding the insertion and permanence of migrants within the labour market during the pandemic. African migrants, particularly women, were disproportionately affected by instability and low wages in Brazil.

In the labour market, the health emergency worsened the already existing economic crisis, with considerable impacts on workers in various sectors. This had a strong impact on the migrant population. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, the unemployment rate reached 14.9%. Among migrants in formal employment, there was a 60% reduction in admissions in April 2020, compared to the same month in 2019. In that month, more than 3,000 were fired (Tonhati, Cavalcanti and Oliveira, 2022). Migrants were affected by government measures that allowed companies to reduce the number of hours worked and wages and temporarily suspend contracts (Coraccini, 2021).

Racism and sexism marked the insertion and permanence of migrants in the labour market, in which the people most affected by instability and low wages are African migrants, especially women (Tonhati and Macedo, 2020). Women, who were more involved in specific job niches such as cleaning and the retail and restaurant sectors, earned 70% lower wages than men and were the majority among unemployed migrants. They felt the brunt of the lack of job security and saw a significant increase in domestic and care activities. In addition, region of origin and race have influenced income. Migrants from the Global North earn more than those from the Global South. And those perceived as white receive higher wages than those perceived as black, who, on average, earn up to two minimum wages (Cavalcanti, Oliveira and Silva, 2021).

Although the majority of the employed migrant population is made up of men (69%), the degree of informality is higher among women (44%). Without work documents, many migrant women work without a fixed agreed 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 who work in the cultural sector or in the production and sale of handicrafts, which depends on organized fairs and events that were cancelled. This put these women's income at risk.

Although our research is not quantitative in nature with sample significance, it is important to note that half of our interviewees worked without a formal job, informally, while only 6 were formally registered. And many of the formal jobs became informal during the pandemic, largely occupied by migrant women.
Haitian Francine has had many different jobs since she arrived in Brazil, almost 15 years ago. She has worked as a cleaner and a clothing saleswoman, as well as a nanny, with and without a formal contract. When the pandemic hit, Francine had been working in a chocolate factory for four years, as a cleaner. She had a formal contract and liked the job, which she considered better than her previous job, when she was a clothing saleswoman.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Francine had continued working at the chocolate factory, but her working hours have been reduced. With the pandemic under control, in mid-2022, when there was a vaccine and the number of cases of the disease had dropped considerably, Francine was fired from her job, with the justification that it would be necessary to cut costs.

> *"Thank God, at the beginning of the pandemic I was working. Well, actually, there were three of us cleaning ladies, so she did it like this: one day I would go, the other day the other girl*

would go. Then, she [the supervisor} took two hours off. Then, in 2022, she laid me off. The pandemic was better, but she said she was cutting costs, you know, that she did not need a cleaning lady anymore. So I was laid off." [Francine, Haiti]

Francine was still covered by unemployment insurance for 5 months after her dismissal. Later, she got another job, this time cleaning construction sites. It was hard work and Francine was not registered. She points out that she earned much less than she had earned in her previous job, with no job security whatsoever.

"I started working again, this job too, I left because ... the contract is intermittent, I didn't like it. It was cleaning after construction sites, it's not the job, because I like cleaning. I didn't like it because the contract isn't good. It's a risky job, because you work in a building, you know. It's hard. I got dengue fever, I spent seven days at home and then they don't accept sick leave. I don't think I'll get paid. To this day I haven't received anything." [Francine, Haiti]

Key Finding 4: Situations of domestic violence, which have increased during the pandemic, have been accompanied by other violences considered to be equally damaging, if not more so, in women's migratory journeys. These include experiences of violence at borders and bureaucratic-state violence in the migratory context, permeated by racism and xenophobia.

We analyzed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the intensification of inequalities and intersectional violence that permeated the experiences of international migrants in Brazil. We found that the manifestations of violence in the lives of migrants and refugees went beyond what is characterized by state and civil society actors as domestic and family violence. According to the interlocutors, in addition to the motivations for migrating related to situations of violence, there are other situations considered equally or more harmful to their migratory journeys, such as those suffered at the borders and bureaucratic-state violence in the countries of arrival, permeated by racism and xenophobia.

Racism and xenophobia are experiences that mark the lives of the women we interviewed, especially for black (African and Central American) and indigenous migrants and refugees. This violence is exacerbated in times of emerging "crisis." There has been an increase in the perception of police violence associated with racism during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Racism is a sensitive topic for the women from African and Central American countries interviewed. They spoke about the institutional racism they suffered in state bureaucracies, at work, and in shelters.

"When I arrived in São Paulo, for the first 6 months, I rarely saw black people. I asked my boss: Julian, where are the black people? And then he said: Oh, I think they go back home because most of them are security guards. Most of my friends from back home are lawyers, engineers, doctors, and almost all of them are black. So, I arrived in Brazil and every time I went out to see a doctor or a dentist, everyone was white". [Camille, Guyana]

"We need to get by. In fact, since I arrived in Brazil, I have never been a victim of prejudice, xenophobia, or racism, but every now and then I have noticed that there is a lot of racism, xenophobia, and prejudice, a lot. I am very sad about this situation because the Brazil we knew before was not like this, you know." [Marrie, Cameroon]

Another important point is that the trajectories of Senegalese and Nigerians - particularly men - in Brazil are marked by police violence, due to accusations of involvement in drug trafficking and robbery. The increase in the perception of lethal violence, however, is a recent discovery, as is the perception that violence occurs not only because they are foreigners, but also because they are black men living in a country marked by structural racism.

"At first I was welcomed by Brazilians, but I have been experiencing racism and xenophobia for some time now. I didn't know what it was. I was just supporting my brothers and sisters who were suffering, but I didn't know it until I was a victim. I am an African

mother and I live with my children. I am a little light-skinned, but my children are very black, so I am scared." [Marrie, Cameroon]

Key Finding 5: **In Brazil, the language of human rights protection raised by regimes combating human trafficking has strengthened security measures that repress prostitution and the movement of migrants across borders, intensifying violence against them. In parallel, among migrants, poverty, and scarcity of employment opportunities, in conjunction with the dynamics of affective, domestic, familial, and national arrangements, have given rise to circumstances that bear similarities to the practices of slave labour and human trafficking in the pandemic period.**

In Brazil, the language of human rights protection invoked by regimes combating human trafficking has strengthened security measures that repress prostitution and the movement of migrants across borders, intensifying violence against them. Facilitating irregular migration, in this context, comes to be treated as a correlate or even a form of human trafficking (Piscitelli, 2013; Piscitelli; Lowenkron, 2015).

The link between migration and human trafficking has recently taken on a new dimension, with serious consequences for migrants during the current administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. During the pandemic, restrictions on entry into Brazilian territory particularly affected people arriving by land. The restriction on this migration was justified as a measure to prevent the spread of the virus in the country. While air borders remained open for most of the pandemic, this led to precarious governance of land migration and an increase in irregular immigration and migration-related expenditure for those entering the country.

In more recent policies, attention has turned to air borders and people entering the country through Guarulhos airport. Since August 2024, a reinterpretation by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (MJSP) and the Federal Police regarding the rules for the entry of asylum seekers has had the effect of restricting the entry of foreigners and denying them entry into the country. The argument presented by the MJSP is that many people want to leave their countries to reach the Global North, using Guarulhos airport as a route. The argument of human trafficking is invoked by linking this concept to that of migrant smuggling, considering that, in the view of the MJSP, there is massive hiring of smugglers who provide documents, visas and tickets. It is therefore argued that these are false refugee applicants, who do not even activate the application process, leading to collective deportations.

Women are the most affected by these measures, considering that there is no attention to gender or specific policies aimed at them, with the situation of pregnant women who have been repatriated being particularly worrying. The conclusion of the migration experts we interviewed during the project is that we are experiencing serious setbacks in terms of border policy. Public discourse on welcoming migrants in Brazil is directed at specific groups at particular political moments, as in the case of Venezuelans in recent years, or Afghans and Syrians. However, the country has played a role in retaining certain flows, such as Haitian nationals, for example, to prevent them from continuing to the United States. In this scenario, Brazil has become one of the externalized borders of the United States and has been playing the role of 'policeman', as one of our interlocutors emphasized.

Brazilian studies consider that various situations of violence, such as physical, sexual and psychological abuse, as well as human trafficking, are linked to precarious conditions such as lack of housing and employment, informal employment, hunger and poverty, lack of access to care and protection services and irregular migration (Fiocruz, 2021). Regarding human trafficking for labour exploitation in sewing workshops in São Paulo, the research revealed the fragile and permeable boundaries that intersect between labour exploitation, family life, notions of nationhood and domesticity, and entrepreneurship. This is evident in our interviewees statements:

'Is it wrong to teach my children to work and ask them to help me?',

'The owner of the workshop is my cousin. Is that also slave labour?'

'You talk a lot about workers' rights, But what about the rights of employers?'

Faced with these questions, it was difficult to provide answers that categorized exploited and exploitative workers as antagonists. We observed that the factors of "vulnerability" to human trafficking and situations of slave labor that permeate the sewing chains in São Paulo include poverty and the lack of job opportunities, but also the complexity of emotional, domestic, family and co-national arrangements.

Key Finding 6: Collectives of migrant women were a fundamental source of support during the pandemic, offering material aid and networks of affection and solidarity.

For some migrant women, the pandemic was a moment of mobilization for the delivery of food and supplies, in addition to the creation of labour cooperatives focused on sewing and political mobilization to facilitate access to emergency public policies. Faced with countless obstacles and challenges, civil society organizations and migrant women's collectives organized actions and campaigns to support those most in need. In addition to the #RegularizaçãoJá campaign, which involved more than 20 organizations focused on the migration issue and demanded the regularization of undocumented migrants in Brazil, letters were sent regarding the impediment of access to emergency aid to the state bank and the Federal Revenue Service. In different parts of the country, groups of migrant women also hold virtual meetings to discuss issues such as domestic violence, campaign for food donations and conduct virtual marketing of products made by migrants. (Villalón et al., 2021).

Despite all the difficulties and processes of violence that permeated the narratives of the women we interviewed, there were those who found ways to survive during the pandemic, especially through the creation and strengthening of work and mutual support networks.

When the COVID-19 pandemic spread, Sandra, a migrant from Bolivia, had serious health problems – unrelated to the virus – and needed to undergo surgery. Shortly after, her house and workshop were flooded. Recovering from surgery and all the problems caused by the flood water meant that Sandra had to work hard to meet deadlines. With the subsequent drop in demand due to the pandemic, she started sewing masks. At that time, she was also receiving emergency aid. Influenced by a neighbour, Sandra started going to Casa do Povo, a cultural centre that hosts social projects, and became so involved in the activities that she founded a sewing cooperative there. In her words, the project saved her life during the pandemic.

"I didn't know what I was capable of. Until then, I was just Sandra, a resident of Bom Retiro, but when I went to Casa do Povo... It seems that at that moment, I felt like a leader. Before, I was nothing. Then we started calling women to sew, and the Cooperative was born." [Sandra, Bolivia]

The work began with five women and eventually grew to over 30. Sandra became the president of the organization, centralizing much of the work. The cooperative closed after the pandemic, but two other spin-off organizations have since emerged.

"It was the place I wanted to be in, to help women, to take care of them. I felt like everyone's mother because my life was the organization. I wanted to live from Monday to Monday at Casa do Povo, working, caring, listening, because for every woman who called and said, 'I have a problem,' I said, 'Come on, let's work.'" [Sandra, Bolivia]

Key Finding 7: The post-pandemic period proved to be more challenging than the pandemic itself. Since the pandemic period was characterised by an escalation in precariousness, migrant women, who were not mentioned in specific public policies, derived significant benefits from the universalist policies that were implemented during that period. The post-pandemic 'crisis' has seen a marked intensification of poverty and violence.

The development of the research led to questioning some of the research assumptions. The first of these concerns the negative effects of the COVID pandemic on the experiences of migrants. In the perception of many of the research interlocutors in Brazil, while some situations of precariousness were exacerbated, especially those related to the labour market, housing, health, and family reunions, some of these situations were relatively alleviated during the pandemic. The emergency aid represented a significant increase in income for some of these families. In addition, the possibility of intensifying certain work activities carried out online, such as distance language teaching and the expansion of spaces for political mobilization, minimized the negative effects.

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that, while for some migrants the freezing of expulsions during the pandemic meant extending the time they were forced to remain away from their families and children, for others it was the freezing of the processing of the expulsion process that made it possible for them to regularize their migration status in the country. These trajectories confirm the perceptions of migration experts interviewed during the research: with the end of the pandemic, some situations worsened.

These results present nuances that call into question the notion that the pandemic period was, indiscriminately, a time of increased precariousness for all migrants. There are relevant differences, especially considering that these are people who lack specific public policies and ended up benefiting from universalist policies implemented at that time. Nevertheless, there was an intensification of "crises" resulting from the effects of the pandemic. The post-pandemic period was the most critical period in terms of finances and material precariousness.

The interruption of government aid programs at a time when the labour market had not yet fully recovered deepened the precariousness faced by migrant women. This happened especially when the "return to normal" was declared, in which the end of aid policies, the inability of the job market to recover and the abrupt interruption of "solidarity" actions by civil society meant what some interviewees described as abandonment at a time when everyone should, once again, "get by".

Considering our interviewees, although the pandemic was remembered as a very difficult period in terms of work, marked by significant precariousness, informality, and long working hours, some of the women we spoke to were able to keep their jobs and, some of them, were also able to take care of their children. This was the case of the interviewees who taught language classes. The pandemic allowed their classes to be online. This way, it was possible to take on more students, in addition to the fact that, at that time, the demand for language courses increased considerably. There were therefore some reports in which online work allowed mothers to stay with their mothers, taking care of their children, at a time when schools and daycare centres remained closed.

Elise, a single mother and refugee from Cameroon, described this period as a "nice" time when she was able to rest and spend more time at home with her son, whom she saw very little of daily. Elise relied on the school bus and the help of a neighbour in her busy daily routine, in which she balanced work and caring for her son. In particular, the task of taking the child to school when school transport was no longer available was an almost impossible task. It was for this reason, and because she had the opportunity to work from home, that Elise remembered the pandemic as a positive moment in this aspect. In addition, at that time she was able to count on an increase in her income due to emergency aid and finally being able to rest.

> *Elise: I was teaching French in person and then with this pandemic we had to do it online. But now there are no more students there who want to learn the language. I used to teach at [name of organization]. They would get the students ready and the teacher would teach. They were also valuing our culture, you know? The refugees. First, I didn't like teaching, but what am I going to do here in Brazil? We adapt to the environment because we have families to take care of.*

Jullyane: Now you're on Bolsa Família, but what was it like during the pandemic? Did you receive emergency aid?

Elise: It was nice. It was more money, right? And then everything stopped, he was studying at home and the kitten we adopted was jumping on things. But then it was also good that we could rest a little, you know?
[Elise, Cameroon]

Profile of participants in Portugal

During the project, 7 migration experts from organizations directed towards migrants and 1 governmental agent were interviewed in Portugal, as well as 9 migrant women with different backgrounds. Most of the interviewees were in their twenties and thirties and had arrived in Portugal in the last 5 years, while one was in her fifties and migrated 15 years ago.

Six women were postgraduate students, migrated with the support of their families, were single, had no children and had Brazilian or Portuguese grants. Six women had a background in the Brazilian middle classes and three were from lower classes in Brazil. Two of the interviewees initiated but not concluded higher education and one had the equivalent of high school. The three latter were single or divorced, two of them had children and were self-employed without any employment record, in the cleaning and care sectors, including care for the elderly and sex work. All the interviewees had a regular migrant status in Portugal. All were seen as white in Brazil, but racialized as Brazilians in Portugal.

Recruitment for the interviews was carried out using mixed methods, both through migrant organizations and through snowballing (recommendation of other possible participants by the interviewees) and contacts established in previous research. All participants' names are pseudonyms, no real names are used. Both in Brazil and in Portugal the research involved observation in organizations directed towards migrants and interactions with the women migrants in their daily activities.

Key findings regarding Brazilian women migrants in Portugal

Key Finding 1: Portugal has a National Immigration and Asylum Policy aimed at regulating migration flows, promoting legal immigration, fighting irregular immigration, and integrating migrants. During the pandemic, measures considered examples of humanitarian action facilitated legal migrants' access to health services and emergency basic income.

Key finding 2: The intersection of gender, race, and national origin are determining factors in the processes of racialization and the xenophobia that affect Brazilian women in Portugal. Despite legal provisions, during the pandemic, these processes have hindered access to health services, even for 'skilled' migrants.

Key finding 3: Domestic violence has affected Brazilian women in Portugal during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. However, this is only one dimension of the violence that affects them, which also includes xenophobic institutional and workplace violence.

Key finding 4: Women migrants' collective agency has manifested itself in the creation of new support organizations set up by Brazilian women and in the search for support of people of the same nationality, which has led to a reconfiguration of the notion of kinship among the interviewees.

Key Finding 1: Portugal has a National Immigration and Asylum Policy aimed at regulating migration flows, promoting legal immigration, combating irregular immigration and integrating migrants. During the pandemic, measures considered examples of humanitarian action facilitated access to health services and emergency basic income.

In Portugal, there is a National Immigration and Asylum Policy aimed at regulating migratory flows, promoting legal immigration, combating irregular immigration, and integrating migrants. The latter is carried out at the local level through Municipal Plans for the Integration of Migrants and Local Support Centres for the Integration of Migrants (Estrela, 2021).

During the COVID pandemic, ordinances extended the deadline for renewing residence permits, visas and documents for legal stay in Portuguese territory and granted equal rights to immigrants, asylum seekers and Portuguese citizens to facilitate access to health services and emergency basic income.[1] In addition to changes in legislation, there has been investment in a *National Plan to Combat Racism and Discrimination 2021-2025 - Portugal against racism*, which culminated in a proposal to eliminate racism and discrimination, considered as any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race[2]. This plan was a response to the emergence of extremist and racist political forces, the succession of episodes and discourses of violence and hate, and also the effects of the pandemic crisis. In 2022, in the post-pandemic period, most of the complaints received by the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination were related to Brazilian nationality, Roma ethnicity and skin colour.

Key finding 2: The intersection of gender, race and national origin are determining factors in the processes of racialization and xenophobia affecting Brazilian women. Despite legal provisions, during the pandemic these processes have hindered access to health services, even for skilled migrants.

In Portugal, Brazilians constitute the largest contingent of foreigners with residence permits (27.8% in 2020). This contingent has tripled since 2012 (SEF[3]) and is made up mainly of women[4]. Since 2016, the profile of Brazilian immigrants to Portugal has changed, diversifying to include a significant number of migrants with high levels of professional qualifications, academic training, and entrepreneurs. (Fernandes et al., 2022).

The pandemic has affected Brazilian female migrants in different ways depending on their integration in Portugal. Many were unable to obtain legal status and work, preferring to return to Brazil, which was made difficult by restrictive policies. With the suspension of flights between Portugal and Brazil, mainly during the first lockdown in 2020, many Brazilians were stranded at the airport, seeking alternative ways to return to Brazil and often facing economic, employment and housing difficulties (Machado Coelho 2021). In the second lockdown in 2021, many Brazilians who had decided to return and had already terminated their employment or housing contracts had to find alternatives in the face of the impossibility of travelling to Brazil, exposing them to situations of greater vulnerability.

This has not been the case of the interviewees who were postgraduate university students. However, one point on which the narratives of Brazilian women migrants coincide, whether they were university students with scholarships or labour migrants, is the perception that they are targets of xenophobia. The students pointed to difficulties during the pandemic, especially regarding access to public health services and document renewal. Most narratives attribute this difficulty to the fact that they are Brazilians. Mariana, 32, a doctoral student in Social Sciences in Coimbra, of average height, with white skin and dark brown hair, says she heard health workers say: *you are a burden on the Portuguese state* – which she attributes to the increase in the number of Brazilians in Portugal, but they also told her: *seek health services at the university, since you are studying here.*

According to her, her Portuguese colleagues were not referred to other places for care. As observed by Iorio e Silva (2024), the pandemic had an impact on students' mental health, causing greater fear, anxiety and stress among migrants,

because there was no information service from higher education institutions adequate for this population. Several reports claimed the right enacted by the Portuguese Ministry of Health: "any foreigner with legal residence in Portugal can apply for a National Health Service (SNS) user number through the Family Health Units (USF), which provide primary health care, mainly through consultations with a family doctor".[5]

Furthermore, according to Clara, 24, a tall, blonde, master's student in Social Sciences, her Portuguese colleagues were not referred to other places for care. Among the interviewees, only one had applied for unemployment benefit (up to 438.81 euros), but they reported that several colleagues who had tried had not been successful by March 2021.

Key finding 3: Domestic violence has affected Brazilian women in Portugal during the pandemic and the post-pandemic period. However, this is only one dimension of the violence that affects them, which also includes xenophobic institutional and workplace violence.

Domestic violence has affected Brazilian women in Portugal during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. In 2023, more than 1,500 Brazilian women living abroad requested support from the Brazilian authorities to deal with these cases. Portugal ranks fourth in Europe in terms of reports, with 127 cases that year. In addition, it is common practice to use children to assault women in cases of custody disputes (110 in Portugal that year) and child abduction (18)[6]. However, the violence affecting Brazilian women goes far beyond the domestic sphere, encompassing institutional violence in relations with health workers, in the workplace and in academia.

It is important to note that during the pandemic, discrimination against migrants, especially Brazilians, was fueled by a proliferation of hate speech on blogs, websites and internet pages, whether linked to the far right or not (including Piratas do Regime and O bom europeu). The profile *Apanhei Covid na Feup* (I caught Covid at FEUP, the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto) published an image of the coronavirus, the Brazilian flag and Brazilians represented as monkeys on the university campus, accompanied by comments referring to class issues - *The problem with this country is that it accepts so many slum dwellers!!!*. Another episode that also went viral on social media occurred at the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon, which displayed a box with stones and invited passers-by to throw them at Brazilian students.[7]

On 30 October 2020, racist and xenophobic messages spray-painted on the walls of the Portuguese Catholic University, the Lisbon University Institute (ISCTE) and three secondary schools in Greater Lisbon were highlighted in the media and on social media. Most of the messages expressed hatred towards Roma people, Black people and Brazilians - *Portugal is white, Black people, go back to Africa! Zucas, go back to the favelas/shantytowns! We don't want you here!; Black people out! For a white school.*[8]

The repercussions of these news stories on social media and institutionalized media served as a trigger for the research participants to reflect on their experiences at university. Mariana said:

> *"Finally, I find an echo of what I have been through, but I couldn't express it and often wondered if it was just in my head."*

None of them had problems with documentation or reported physical violence, but they pointed to the everyday violence they experienced or that was reported by their classmates. Nationality, initially detected by their 'Brazilian accent,' long a factor of mistrust when renting property to Brazilians, took on a *frightening* dimension according to the narratives. Lyria – brunette, 56 years old, in Portugal for 30 years and married to a Portuguese man – who, at the time of the interview (November 2022), worked at the Centre for Migration and Cultural Integration at the Open University, states:

> *"Many immigrants who come to the centre say they are tired of facing the same insults every day... you can't speak, you're stupid, you won't get a job even as a waitress."*

Mariela, 23, a tall, blonde, green eyes, master's student in psychology - points out that she was perceived as European until she started speaking Brazilian...

> *"I heard from Portuguese colleagues that my difficulty in speaking Portuguese correctly was a cognitive problem, in other words, they called me stupid."*

Mariana said she suffered moral harassment from teachers in Coimbra because they considered her Portuguese was incorrect, but she attributes what she calls violence to several factors:

> *"I am white, but I am Brazilian, and that seems to somehow make me brown, and I also don't know how to write in Portuguese from Portugal, which is another factor that increases disrespect and disqualification."*

Stereotypes of Brazilian women, linked to hypersexualized images (Assis y Siqueira, 2021; Gomes, 2018; Beleli, 2012) considered as whores who come to Portugal to steal husbands, have been analyzed in different studies (Gomes, 2018; Dias and Ramos, 2019; Costa and Ruviaro, 2020). These stereotypes have an impact on the integration of Brazilian migrants into the labour market, but they also affect the lives of those who are in the country to study, funded by Brazilian or Portuguese scholarships.

Even Brazilian women enrolled in postgraduate programs, identified as 'skilled migrants' (Fernandes, 2021), do not escape disqualification, which links xenophobia to the image of prostitution and easy flirting, pointing to the articulation of categories of difference that seem to foster prejudice and discrimination (Piscitelli, 2008). These ideas, which have gone viral on social media and are felt by them, are pointed out in the narratives as something that affects their mobility, because they make it even more difficult to find work, rent property, among other everyday issues, such as the suspicious looks they receive from Portuguese women. Mônica, a 30 years old, PhD student in Human Sciences in Coimbra, with white, dark hair, dark brown eyes), recounts an encounter with a Portuguese woman in a café:

> *"What are you doing here? When I replied that I was doing a PhD, I noticed the look of suspicion... followed by the question, 'You're not looking for a Portuguese husband, are you?"*

Celeste, a 27 year old brunette, with dark hair, specializing in psychology, points out a difference between her process of displacement, which she considers to be 'skilled migration', and others, noting that coming to Portugal to study set her apart from those who were just looking for an international experience or better jobs than they could get in Brazil. For this very reason, she understands that the proliferation of hate speech against female students was a form of disqualification, both during her studies and in terms of the possibility of transforming her displacement process solely for the purpose of studying into a migration project:

> *"I really like living here and think I would like to stay, but the generalized disqualification discourages me... I feel vulnerable, it seems like they suspect us all the time, even as students, imagine if I were to apply for a job!"*

Key finding 4: Women migrants' collective agency has manifested itself in the creation of new support organizations set up by Brazilian women and in the search for support of people of the same nationality, which has led to a reconfiguration of the notion of kinship among the interviewees.

Brazilian women migrants' collective agency in Portugal during and after the pandemic has expressed itself, in collective terms, by creating new organizations and networks based on social media. Existing migrant support organizations have been joined by new ones that created websites and Whatsapp groups for reporting incidents and providing diverse lines of support, such as Brasileiras não se Calam (Brazilian Women Won't Be Silenced) and Plataforma Geni (Geni Platform). Made up of highly qualified women who assert their rights, these have been spaces for assistance and collective action.

Another fundamental source of support have been the bonds of affection created during the

migration process, referred to as *family*, in a movement that redefines the notion of family. These bonds have been identified by the interviewees as crucial not only during the pandemic, providing emotional and financial support, even without any family ties. The interviewees migrated alone and highlight that those emotional relationships were established more easily with Brazilians, even among those who did not share the student status – restaurant or bar owners – *unlike the formality and distance that characterized the relationship with the Portuguese*. As Letícia, a tall, thin, blonde, 25 years old, finishing her master's degree, points out:

> *"Here I found another kind of family, friends who sympathize with my pain of often feeling rejected just because I am Brazilian."*

Concluding remarks

In the case of Brazil, it is clear that there is an urgent need to draft a national migration law that takes into account the intersections between gender and race and serves as a tool to combat discrimination based on racism and xenophobia. This law has already been discussed with civil society organisations and should be enacted in the coming months.

However, the perspective offered by the case of Brazilian women in Portugal shows that even when such laws exist, they are not sufficient to protect people from discrimination based on the intersection of gender, race and national origin. The urgent challenge in times of intensified far-right actions against international migrants is to explore new ways to protect the rights of migrant women.

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

Endnotes

1 https://museudaimigracao.org.br/en/blog/migracoes-em-debate/missao-paz-assistencia-formacao-e-incidencia-social-versus-o-negativismo-de-direitos-a-migrantes-e-refugiados-na-interface-da-covid-19

2 https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc22/comunicacao/comunicado?i=plano-nacional-de-combate-ao-racismo-e-a-discriminacao-em-consulta-publica

3 https://www.sef.pt/pt/Pages/homepage.aspx

4 https://sefstat.sef.pt/Docs/Rifa2020.pdf

5 In December 2022, various media outlets reported that the number of residents in Portugal without a family doctor in health centres had already exceeded 1.4 million people, data corroborated by Portuguese citizens in informal conversations. Therefore, it does not appear that this 'shortage' is a policy aimed at immigrants, but rather a general problem that was already felt before the pandemic.

6 Women's Observatory Against Violence. Federal Senate. International records - New database, in: https://www12.senado.leg.br/institucional/omv/mapadaviolencia accessed in March 2025.

7 Folha de S.Paulo. https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2019/04/caixa-com- pedras-para-atirar-em-brasileiros-e-colocada-na-universidade- de-lisboa.shtml. See analysis by Piscitelli and Beleli (2022).

8 https://apartidaria.pt/2020/11/03/escolas-vandalismo-racismo/ 30 Oct 2020 14:43; Jornal Público, 30 October 2020.

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