

Unwelcome in Brazil: the broken promise to Venezuelan refugees

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Ecuador has long presented itself as a host country that is particularly favourable to migrants. Over the past ten years or so, however, “inclusive nationalism” has been transformed into “exclusive nationalism”. NGOs helping forced migrants have mobilised on the legal front and have implemented economic programmes to promote the figure of the “good” refugee.

Drawing on a survey, this article argues that despite Brazil’s promise to welcome Venezuelan asylum seekers as refugees, the country remains hostile to migrants, particularly those from the LGBTQI+ community.

In Latin America, Brazil is a leader in the progression of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons) rights. The country has legalised same-sex marriage, implemented legislation that protects same-sex couples and passed anti-LGBT discrimination laws. Brazil is also known as a welcoming migrant-receiving country. In fact, in a move that received global praise, Brazil recognised thousands of Venezuelan asylum seekers as refugees on a *prima facie* basis in 2019¹. Since 2014, over 5.4 million people have left Venezuela due to violence, persecution and poverty with an additional 1.6 million Venezuelans expected to be displaced by the end of 2021². As of March 2021, 261,000 have settled in Brazil³.

However, despite Brazil being heralded as a progressive State for both LGBT people and migrants, a paradox exists between policy and practice. Rising anti-gender, anti-gay, nationalistic and populist rhetoric make Brazil a dangerous place for LGBT and refugee communities. The election of right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro has intensified the situation. His power is reinforced by a right-wing movement of politicians and church leaders empowering Bolsonaro’s anti-LGBT, anti-gender and nationalist agenda. The emergence of Covid-19 has intensified the situation with heightened political tension and social inequalities fuelled by populist rhetoric. President Bolsonaro quickly dismissed Covid-19 as a “little cold”

¹ Person recognised as a refugee, by a State or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), on the basis of objective criteria related to the circumstances in their country of origin, which justify a presumption that they meet the criteria of the applicable refugee definition: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/prima-facie-refugee_en; See also Mrittika Shamsuddin *et al.*, “Integration of Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in Brazil”, *Policy Research Working Paper no.9605*, March 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Integration-of-Venezuelan-Refugees-and-Migrants-in-Brazil.pdf>

² Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, *Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan January-December 2021*, 2021, <https://www.r4v.info/en/document/rmrp-2021>

³ Mrittika Shamsuddin *et al.*, “Integration of Venezuelan Refugees...”, *op. cit.*

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and fuelled misinformation about vaccines and pharmaceuticals⁴. As of October 2021, with 600,000 deaths, Brazil ranked second in the world in terms of total Covid-19 related deaths⁵.

Thus, our central argument is that despite Brazil's image as a regional leader for LGBT rights and its promise to recognise and welcome Venezuelan refugees on a *prima facie* basis, the country remains hostile to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, particularly those from the LGBTQI+ (QI: queer and intersex) community. This is fuelled by a strong countermovement to LGBTQI+ rights in Brazil led by President Bolsonaro. Additionally, the nationalistic and populist attacks on public health measures during the pandemic adds to the precarity of LGBTQI+ refugees.

The LGBTQI+ and gender backlash in Brazil

Since the 1990s, the LGBTQI+ and feminist movements in Latin America have worked together to advance their rights⁶. Recently, in Brazil, these movements have focused on gender mainstreaming public policies, the legalisation of same-sex marriage and gender identity laws⁷. However, as the rights for women and LGBTQI+ people advance, levels of violence toward those communities have increased. Since 2017, 1,431 LGBTQI+ people have died in situations of violence⁸. Scholars argue that this pushback is led by a countermovement in reaction to the success of the feminist and LGBTQI+ movement⁹. The political countermovement includes several political parties, including the Movement Brasil Livre (MBL), which engages in anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-feminist attacks¹⁰. In addition, the Evangelical Church is a prominent group engaging in an equally hostile rhetoric¹¹. With their allies in Congress, the Evangelical Church helps lead the most powerful voting block known as Bibles, Bullets, and Bison, including religious conservative groups, ruralists, and paramilitary groups. As a result, any legislation that aims to help the LGBTQI+ community or even mentions the term "gender" faces significant barriers in Congress.

During the 2018 Brazilian election, Bolsonaro's law and order campaign seized on nationalistic and populist rhetoric employed by politicians, church leaders, ruralists, and paramilitary groups to rally against the "threats" stemming from LGBTQI+ and feminist groups¹². His campaign slogan "Brazil above everything, God above everybody" positioned him as a right-wing leader with conservative

⁴ Terrence McCoy and Heloísa Traiano, "Brazil's Bolsonaro, channeling Trump, dismisses coronavirus measures – it's just 'a little cold'", *The Washington Post*, 25 March 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-americas/brazils-bolsonaro-channeling-trump-dismisses-coronavirus-measures--its-just-a-little-cold/2020/03/25/65bc90d6-6e99-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html; Tom Phillips, "Brazil: Bolsonaro reportedly uses homophobic slur to mock masks", *The Guardian*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/08/bolsonaro-masks-slur-brazil-coronavirus>

⁵ World Health Organization, *WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*, November 2021, <https://covid19.who.int>

⁶ Marlise Matos, "Gender and Sexuality in Brazilian Public Policy: Progress and Regression in Depatriarchalizing and Deheteronormalizing the State", in Elisabeth Jay Friedman (ed.), *Seeking Rights from the Left: Gender, Sexuality, and the Latin American Pink Tide*, Duke University Press, 2018, p.144-172.

⁷ Elisabeth Jay Friedman (ed.), *Seeking Rights from the Left: Gender, Sexuality, and the Latin American Pink Tide*, Duke University Press, 2018.

⁸ Genilson Coutinho, "Relatório do GGB revela crescimento de assassinatos de travestis e transexuais em 2020", *Dois Terços*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.doisercos.com.br/relatorio-do-ggb-revela-crescimento-de-assassinatos-de-travestis-e-transexuais-em-2020>

⁹ Robert Tyler Valiquette, "The Politics of Homophobia in Brazil: Congress and Social (counter)Mobilization", *University of Guelph Library*, June 2017, https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10214/11509/Valiquette_RobertTyler_201708_MA.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹⁰ Leigh A. Payne and Andreza Aruska de Souza Santos, "The Right-Wing Backlash in Brazil and Beyond", *Politics & Gender*, vol.16, no.1, March 2020.

¹¹ Omar Guillermo Encarnación, *Out on the periphery: Latin America's gay rights revolution*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹² Leigh A. Payne and Andreza Aruska de Souza Santos, "The Right-Wing Backlash..." art. cit.

values. During the election, Bolsonaro attacked what he called “gender ideology” for destroying society’s values¹³. The right-wing agenda finds support from far-right groups that intend to reconstruct traditional gender order¹⁴. Bolsonaro was an ideal presidential candidate for this far-right countermovement, as he frequently attacks the LGBTQI+ and feminist communities. For example, in 2014, he told a female lawmaker that “I wouldn’t rape you because you are not worthy of it” and, in 2013, he proclaimed he was “proud to be homophobic”¹⁵. The rise of a strong anti-LGBTQI+ and gender countermovement has led to pushback against the LGBTQI+ community, impacting the resulting refugees. The government’s poor response has turned Brazil into a “gigantic hellhole” amid the pandemic, adding to refugees’ precarity¹⁶.

Anti-public health populism on the rise in Brazil

Since the adoption of the 1988 Constitution, Brazil has established “health as a fundamental right and a responsibility of the State”¹⁷. To implement this right, the Constitution created the Unified Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde – SUS in Portuguese), which is the most extensive fully government-funded health system in the world¹⁸. Since its introduction, SUS has improved the population’s access to health. However, an economic and political crisis combined with austerity policies has impacted this system. This was exacerbated by the implementation of a neoliberal agenda after the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2015¹⁹ and reinforced by the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018²⁰.

When the pandemic reached Brazil, Bolsonaro denied the possible health impacts and dismissed public health preventive measures that, in his opinion, would negatively impact the economy. In an official speech on 24 March 2020, when Brazil had accumulated 904 cases and eleven deaths, Bolsonaro accused the media of spreading hysteria²¹. He employed a nationalist argument that the surge in the number of deaths in Italy could not happen in Brazil because Italy’s population is older and because of climatic differences. Through misinformation and disinformation, Bolsonaro publicly countered scientific and evidence-based public health recommendations²². Later in March 2020, with

¹³ Ariel Alejandro Goldstein, “The New Far-Right in Brazil and the Construction of a Right-Wing Order”, *Latin American Perspectives*, vol.46, no.4, p.245-262, 2019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Mariana Simões, “Brazil’s Polarizing New President, Jair Bolsonaro, in His Own Words”, *The New York Times*, 28 October 2018.

¹⁶ Yvonne Su, Tyler Valiquette and Yuriko Cowper-Smith, “Surviving Overlapping Precarity in a ‘Gigantic Hellhole’: A Case Study of Venezuelan LGBTQI+ Asylum Seekers and Undocument Migrant in Brazil amid COVID-19”, *The Statelessness & Citizenship Review*, vol.3, no.1, p.155-162, 2021.

¹⁷ Adriano Massuda *et al.*, “The Brazilian health system at crossroads: progress, crisis and resilience”, *BMJ Global Health*, 2018, <https://gh.bmj.com/content/bmjgh/3/4/e000829.full.pdf>

¹⁸ “Brasil é único com ‘SUS’ entre países com mais de 200 milhões de habitantes”, *Folha de S. Paulo*, 10 octobre 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2019/10/brasil-e-unico-com-sus-entre-paises-com-mais-de-200-milhoes-de-habitantes.shtml>

¹⁹ Adriano Massuda *et al.*, “The Brazilian health system...”, art. cit.

²⁰ Ernesto Londoño and Leticia Casado, “A Collapse Foretold: How Brazil’s COVID-19 Outbreak Overwhelmed Hospitals”, *The New York Times*, 31 May 2021, <https://www.msn.com/en-in/money/topstories/a-collapse-foretold-how-brazil-s-covid-19-outbreak-overwhelmed-hospitals/ar-BB1f2bWm>

²¹ “‘Gripezinha’: leia a íntegra do pronunciamento de Bolsonaro sobre covid-19”, *UOL*, 24 mars 2020, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/03/24/leia-o-pronunciamento-do-presidente-jair-bolsonaro-na-integra.htm>

²² Julie Ricard and Juliano Medeiros, “Using misinformation as a political weapon: COVID-19 and Bolsonaro in Brazil”, *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, vol.1, no.2, p.1-8, April 2020, https://misinfoeview.hks.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ricard_misinformation_weapon_brazil_20200417.pdf

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2,915 cases and seventy-seven deaths, Bolsonaro used nationalist fervour to illustrate the resilience of Brazilians to ward off the virus citing, “Brazilians jump into the sewer and nothing happens”²³.

Bolsonaro’s motivation was to keep the economy running at all costs and avoid lockdowns to please his most loyal supporters, conservatives and business owners. Bolsonaro even turned to the Supreme Court to prevent states and municipalities from instating preventive measures, which was denied²⁴. Cornered by the courts and contrary to public health experts, the federal government invested heavily in acquiring ineffective Covid-19 drugs, such as hydroxychloroquine. Bolsonaro also politicised the acquisition of vaccines, repeatedly taking a nationalist stand against Chinese-produced “communist” vaccines while blaming China for the pandemic²⁵.

Even so, on 10 November 2020, when the country had 5,700,044 cases and 162,829 deaths, Bolsonaro turned to a homophobic slur to argue that Brazil should stop being “a country of sissies” and face the virus²⁶. He used the pejorative term “sissy” again to describe mask-wearers. In another attempt to distract people from the seriousness of the pandemic, Bolsonaro argued that “death was everyone’s inevitable fate”²⁷. At no point in the pandemic has he shown a desire to follow public health experts. Almost two years since the beginning of the pandemic, he continues to protect the economy from the disease instead of protecting people from it.

The lack of leadership from the federal government has created conflict between the different levels of government, as ideological disputes unfold between anti-lockdown and pro-hydroxychloroquine parties versus pro-lockdown and pro-vaccine groups. Even SUS, which had proved successful in the past, could not control the politicisation of the pandemic. Its inability to operate efficiently impacted all Brazilians, but even more so refugees and asylum seekers, who did not have access to private health insurance, had difficulty accessing information and were at the mercy of an overcrowded healthcare system in a xenophobic and homophobic context.

The impact on refugees

The Brazilian government’s poor response to Covid-19 has placed an already precarious population into more profound vulnerability. Our survey conducted among fifty-six Venezuelan asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants in Manaus, Brazil, between June and July 2021, revealed three key findings. First, they faced more physical violence in Brazil due to their sexual orientation and gender identity during the pandemic; secondly, they feel the Brazilian government’s response is inadequate; and finally, many of them contracted Covid-19.

Before the pandemic, Venezuelan asylum seekers, refugees and migrants were already facing xenophobia, including violent xenophobia, with those from the LGBT community facing homophobia

²³ Francisco Ortega and Michael Orsini, “Governing COVID-19 without government in Brazil: Ignorance, neoliberal authoritarianism, and the collapse of public health leadership”, *Global Public Health*, vol.15, no.9, 2020, p.1257-1277.

²⁴ Delis Ortiz et Fernanda Vivas, “Bolsonaro aciona STF contra três decretos estaduais que impõem restrições a fim de conter Covid”, *Portal G1*, 25 mai 2021, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2021/05/27/bolsonaro-aciona-stf-contra-tres-decretos-estaduais-que-impoem-restricoes-a-fim-de-conter-covid.ghtml>

²⁵ Daniel Gullino, “Veja 10 vezes em que Bolsonaro criticou a CoronaVac”, *O Globo*, 18 janvier 2021.

²⁶ Gabriela Oliva, “251 mil mortes por Covid: Relembra as falas de Bolsonaro sobre a pandemia”, *Poder 360*, 26 février 2021, <https://www.poder360.com.br/1-ano-de-covid-no-brasil/251-mil-mortes-por-covid-relembra-as-falas-de-bolsonaro-sobre-a-pandemia>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

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and transphobia as well²⁸. Our preliminary interviews with eight Venezuelan asylum seekers in 2019 already found that some have been exploited and “treated as slaves” by their employers because of their nationality and one transwoman was beaten by a male for being trans and the police ignored her case because she is Venezuelan²⁹. Our survey in 2021 shows that when comparing their situation before and during the pandemic, there was an 8% increase in the number of respondents who were victims of physical violence, an 6% increase in violence related to sexual orientation and a 6% increase in violence related to gender identity. Jane*³⁰, a transwoman, shared that she was robbed at gunpoint, and Liz*, another transwoman said she is unemployed “because employers say LGBT people caused Covid-19”. Indeed, our fieldwork has revealed that misinformation blaming LGBT people for the spread of Covid-19 has forced LGBT asylum seekers, refugees and migrants to hide their LGBT identity.

When asked to rate the Brazilian government’s response to the pandemic, 55% of respondents felt the government’s response was inadequate. While 68% of respondents received the government’s emergency fund, most did not feel it was enough and wished more aid was provided. 32% of respondents (eighteen persons) who did not receive any aid explained they were disqualified because they were undocumented or unaware of how to apply. Respondents also shared that more needs to be done to protect them from Covid-19, such as educational campaigns and vaccinations. A shocking 45% of respondents got Covid-19 and three respondents (9%) got Covid-19 twice. Mateo*, a gay Venezuelan asylum seeker, shared that he got Covid-19 the first time from his job at a hotel and the second from his other job as a barista. LGBTQI+ people, particularly asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, are more likely to work in people-facing service industry positions, which expose them to the virus. At the same time, they are one of the least prioritised groups to be vaccinated in Brazil, and only six respondents (10%) reported being vaccinated. In addition, due to a lack of information on Covid-19 and the effectiveness of vaccines, 13% of respondents expressed vaccine-hesitancy.

Brazil has garnered a reputation as a progressive country for both LGBTQI+ people and refugees in adopting specific legislation to assist both groups. However, the rise of a solid countermovement to LGBT rights, headed by nationalist Bolsonaro, is fuelling a backlash against these groups. Covid-19 has exacerbated the problem, resulting in more precarity for LGBTQI+ Venezuelans. Our findings demonstrate that LGBT refugees in Brazil face more precarity and increasing violence and health risks due to the pandemic. As a result, there is a contradiction in policy and practice and how LGBTQI+ Venezuelan asylum seekers, refugees and migrants are treated in Brazil.

²⁸ Shannon Van Sant, “Venezuelan Refugees Face Violence And Closed Borders As They Try To Flee”, *NPR*, 20 August 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/20/640350156/venezuelan-refugees-face-violence-and-closed-borders-as-they-try-to-flee>;

Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, “Venezuelan Refugees in Brazil: Is Xenophobia Replacing Kindness?”, *Providence*, 19 September 2018, <https://providencemag.com/2018/09/venezuelan-refugees-in-brazil-is-xenophobia-replacing-kindness>

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the respondents.

Biographies

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