

‘They Kill Us Trans Women’: Migration, informal labour, and sex work among trans Venezuelan asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Brazil during COVID-19

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Introduction

Since 2015, more than six million Venezuelans, approximately 20 per cent of the population, have fled their country due to violence, persecution, and poverty.¹ Despite these unprecedented numbers, international funding for the crisis is meagre at roughly USD 125 per refugee.² With 8.9 million Venezuelans expected to be displaced globally by 2022³ and COVID-19 dangerously straining national capacities and livelihood opportunities, research on the needs and vulnerabilities of precarious asylum seekers and undocumented migrants is urgently needed.

¹ No author, ‘Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Crisis’, IOM, retrieved 12 June 2022, <https://www.iom.int/venezuelan-refugee-and-migrant-crisis>.

² D Bahar and M Dooley, ‘Venezuela refugee crisis to become the largest and most underfunded in modern history’, The Brookings Institution, 9 December 2019.

³ T Walsh, ‘\$1.79B Needed for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in 2022’, *Devex*, 10 December 2021, <https://www.devex.com/news/1-79b-needed-for-venezuelan-refugees-and-migrants-in-2022-102258>.

Crises and disasters, such as COVID-19, disproportionately affect vulnerable populations in unique ways.⁴ In Brazil, the discrimination, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia that LGBTQI+ Venezuelan asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants already faced were exacerbated during the pandemic. More likely to work in people-facing service industry positions, LGBTQI+ people experienced a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19. They are also most impacted financially by the closure of the service industry and informal economy. As such, a pervasive global trend during the pandemic was LGBTQI+ people experiencing food insecurity.⁵

This short article contributes to the growing scholarship on the complex ways sexual orientation and gender identity impact LGBTQI+ people's experiences of migration, informal labour, and sex work. Drawing on surveys and interviews with twelve trans Venezuelan asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Brazil and six key informant interviews with sex workers, trans activists, and humanitarian and NGO staff, this short article asks: How has COVID-19 affected the livelihoods of trans Venezuelan asylum seekers and undocumented migrants?⁶

Livelihood Security

In 2018, the Brazilian government launched the *Interiorização* (Interiorisation) Strategy to help resettle Venezuelan asylum seekers and refugees from the north to the south, taking pressure off the northern border states of Roraima and Amazonas. Part of the programme involved finding companies or employers to provide job opportunities to asylum seekers and refugees. However, research shows that it is difficult for LGBTQI+ people to participate in the programme, as the LGBTQI+ community, especially trans people, suffers discrimination in the labour market.⁷

⁴ B Wisner *et al.*, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, Oxfordshire, 2004; N Curato and J Ong, 'Disasters Can Lift Veils: Five Issues for Sociological Disaster Studies', *Philippine Sociological Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-25; G Reid and S Ritholtz, 'A Queer Approach to Understanding LGBT Vulnerability during the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Politics & Gender*, vol. 16, issue 4, 2020, pp. 1101-1109, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000707>.

⁵ A Bishop, *Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ People*, OutRight Action International, New York, 2021, https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/COVIDsReportDesign_FINAL_LR_0.pdf.

⁶ For more detail about our methodology see: Y Cowper-Smith, Y Su, and T Valiquette 'Masks are for sissies: The story of LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Brazil during Covid-19', *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 31, issue 6, 2022, pp. 755-769, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1949970>.

⁷ A Karolyne, 'Transgênero vê barreira no mercado desde educação formal até soft skills', *Estadão*, 25 October 2021.

The programme persisted during the pandemic; however, none of the trans people we interviewed had participated, or attempted to participate, in it.

All twelve respondents lost their jobs or sources of livelihood at the beginning of the pandemic, and nine indicated that the COVID restrictions eliminated their sources of income. As businesses and stores began to open up, all respondents shared that they faced many challenges in finding employment despite the availability of programmes designed to expand employment opportunities. The five undocumented respondents faced the most significant challenges because lack of documentation meant they could only be hired for informal, cash-based, and odd jobs. Roberta a young undocumented trans woman, said, 'I was out of work for six months because I don't speak the language and I don't have documentation'.⁸ Three respondents said they were discriminated against due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or nationality, and they had not been able to find work before or during the pandemic. Emily, a middle-aged trans woman, cannot remember the last time she was formally employed, noting, 'It's been a long time since I worked. I cannot find work because I am a trans woman. When I apply for jobs, I've always been rejected'.⁹ Similarly, Ben, a young trans man, shared, 'I've been out of a job for two years. I don't know if it's because of my age, or because of my sexual preference, or because of my expired documentation'.¹⁰ Lindsey, a young trans woman, remembers walking into a job interview and being told shortly after that the job had been filled. As she was walking away, she overheard the boss saying to his employee, 'Don't bring me another fucking Venezuelan'. The challenges the respondents faced were echoed by the president of the Association of Transgender of Amazonas (ATA), who reflected that 'It is hard for trans people to get jobs, but it is even harder for trans Venezuelans'.¹¹ The president notes that sex work has become a common source of livelihood for trans Venezuelan migrants. When they arrive in Brazil, often through the northern state of Roraima, many are unable to find formal work. As a result, pimps take advantage of their lack of economic opportunities and direct them towards prostitution.

The respondents who were able to find work during the pandemic when business restrictions were lifted found that wages significantly cut compared to before COVID. For those in sex work, the difference in income was drastic. Sarah, a young trans woman who engages in sex work, shared that her monthly income was BRL 4,000 (USD 730) before the pandemic, and presently it is only BRL 1,200 (USD 220). When asked to compare their monthly income before and

⁸ Interview, 10 September 2021. To protect the identities of respondents, all names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

⁹ Interview, 6 September 2021.

¹⁰ Interview, 28 August 2021.

¹¹ Interview, Association of Transgender Amazonas, 4 November 2021.

during COVID-19, three respondents indicated that they no longer had any income, and three others, who previously had a monthly income of above BRL 600 (100 USD), now earn much less.

Despite the challenges trans asylum seekers and undocumented migrants faced finding employment during the pandemic, some were able to be resourceful to make money. Several hairdressers or beauticians contacted their clients informally to provide services in their homes or found new clients through networking. However, despite their resourcefulness, the risk of contracting COVID-19 made finding clients difficult. Two respondents reported contracting COVID-19, likely from their work. Additionally, this livelihood insecurity impacted their ability to purchase goods, especially food. As Linda explained, ‘The pandemic affected me because the beauty salon where I worked closed, and we practically ran out of jobs, and I had almost no money to buy food, so I would often go hungry’.¹²

Indeed, eleven respondents reported that they did not have enough food to eat every day during the pandemic. As a response, NGOs like Casa Miga, the only LGBTQI+ refugee shelter in Brazil, and ATA give out food as part of their main programming. Similarly, all respondents reported not having enough money to buy essential items during the pandemic. While the seven documented respondents accessed the Brazilian government’s COVID emergency fund, the five undocumented respondents did not.

Sex Work and Trafficking

Cindy is a 20-year-old Venezuelan trans woman who travelled to Brazil during the pandemic with a close friend. A relative in Brazil promised her work, but that opportunity fell through soon after she arrived. Cindy was told that if she wanted to stay in Brazil, she would need to quickly find a job. Her friend recommended she go into sex work. Soon she was introduced to a pimp and she began working on the streets. While Cindy expected to experience a certain level of risk in her job, she never predicted she would be kidnapped by a client. A few months after she started working, a client drove her out to the countryside without her consent. There he held her captive and threatened to kill her if she screamed or tried to escape. He attempted to make Cindy feel powerless by telling her that if he killed her, no one would care or come looking because she was Venezuelan. Cindy managed to escape and had to walk from a remote village in the Amazon back to the city in the little clothes she had left on.

The level of gender-based violence, xenophobia, and transphobia Cindy experienced reflects the dangers that trans Venezuelans experience in Brazil.

¹² Interview, 2 September 2021.

Despite Brazil having some of Latin America's most advanced laws to protect LGBTQI+ people, they are disproportionately harassed and victimised because of the country's deep-rooted social conservatism.¹³ Between 2015 and 2017, 24,600 violent incidents were perpetrated against LGBTQI+ people in Brazil.¹⁴ In addition, Brazil has the highest level of violence against trans people in the world.¹⁵

As a result of their intersecting and multiple social locations, trans undocumented migrants like Cindy are in highly precarious positions. To begin with, they are more exposed to sexually transmitted infections (STI). A doctor who works with the trans community shared that sex workers are at a greater likelihood to contract HIV and other STIs through their work.¹⁶ In addition, the growing xenophobia in border towns such as Boa Vista in Roraima, has pushed trans sex workers to move to other states to look for another job. Dina expressed concerns about being a sex worker because 'they kill us trans women'.¹⁷ Such a hostile environment also makes trans sex workers vulnerable to trafficking. The president of ATA explained that since many of the trans Venezuelan migrants are new to sex work, they are not fully aware of the situations that their pimps place them in. For example, it is common for their pimps to convince them to travel to the southern parts of the country with the promise of greater economic opportunities. But once they arrive, they are just met by another pimp and offered the same pay and work, or sometimes less pay and worse treatment. Thus, faced with significant challenges to find work besides sex work, trans Venezuelan migrants often have little choice but to travel to other parts of the country, willingly or through coercion, to earn a living.

When asked why trans people cannot find jobs in other industries, the president of ATA shared that 'Even though there may be jobs available, trans people often do not fit the criteria. They don't have the level of education required. But there is also a lack of interest in training courses because asylum seekers prefer to make money over studying'.¹⁸ And when trans Venezuelans do have a higher level of education, they often have a hard time proving it. Emily shared that she had brought papers with her to Brazil to prove she had a Bachelor's degree. But those

¹³ Cowper-Smith, Su, and Valiquette.

¹⁴ P Francisco and R Muggah, 'Brazil's LGBT Community Faces Surging Violence, But They Are Fighting Back', *Open Democracy*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/violencia-anti-lgbtq-brasil-en>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Interview, 3 November 2021.

¹⁷ Interview, 10 September 2021.

¹⁸ Interview, ATA, 4 November 2021.

papers were lost when she was robbed by a group of men on a *trocha* (an informal path to cross the border) she took to get to Brazil. Unable to prove her education, Emily took up informal work selling water on the streets until the pandemic hit and she could no longer be a vendor.¹⁹

Conclusion

The multiple and intersecting social locations of trans asylum seekers place them in a highly precarious position in Brazil. Many barriers persist despite NGOs like ATA and Casa Miga providing training for them. The trans Venezuelan identity is often subjected to a combination of transphobia and xenophobia according to our study. These identities increase the challenges in finding formal work. Many trans Venezuelan migrants rely on the fast money promised from sex work. As a result, many are vulnerable to being trafficked to other states or countries. Government policies that identify the unique needs of trans asylum seekers and provide services to them—mainly focused on livelihoods—could make a difference in opening up more opportunities for this group made vulnerable by xenophobia, transphobia, and poor migration and social protections policies.

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¹⁹ Interview, 6 September 2021.