

MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN BRAZIL AS SOCIAL ACTORS: NARRATIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Migrants and refugees in Brazil have lately been arriving from other Latin American countries. The last Demographic Brazilian Census of 2022 shows that the total foreign-born population was of approximately a million migrants, where roughly 72% corresponded to Latin Americans. In this study, migrants and refugees are regarded as social subjects active in their migration processes, who exercise their agency in different realms of life using resilience and/or resistance strategies. The strategies implemented by transnational and national migrant collectives, often through digital media, the specificities of women migrants' struggles, those followed in the world of work and in relation to health-care have been prioritized in this analysis. Methodologically, the text is based upon a critical qualitative review of academic specialized social science literature, statistics, public documents and information from migrant collectives and pro-migrant NGOs. It is also illustrated by selected migrants' narratives found in the articles selected. Main findings show that agency is always present among migrants and refugees, as far as they are not regarded as victims or passive recipients of State aid and support. The lack of the latter tends to activate their potential for agency, often expressed as an interconnection between adaptation and opposition behaviours.

Keywords: Latin American migrants; Brazil; agency; resilience; resistance, migrant collectives; refugee collectives; pro-migration NGOs.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Brazil has seen a significant shift in its migrant population, with Latin American countries now providing the vast majority of new arrivals, partly due to the increase in migration restrictions established by the countries within the Global North. Economic crisis, violence, persecution and political uncertainty, has led Latin American populations to leave their countries of origin looking for mere survival, better standards of living and peace.

According to the last Brazilian Demographic Census (IBGE, 2022), the total foreign-born population, was of approximately a million migrants, where roughly 72% corresponded to Latin Americans. This type of residents amounted to 646 000 migrants, more than a three-and-a-half-fold rise from those living in Brazil in 2010 (183 000 Latin American migrants). Among them, in spite of the growth in the feminization of migration, there is still a majority of men,

52.2% versus 47.8% of women. It is a young population with a median age of 30.7 years old though concentrated primarily in the 20-49 age-cohort – with a majority declaring themselves as brown 42.9%, 39.0% as white and 15.9% as black.

SISMIGRA's new refugee registrations and asylum seekers for 2024 showed an additional 194 331 people and a continuity of more than half of males, though female migrants also have increased due to their access to family reunification policies. The leading nationality was that of Venezuelans, that received 94 726 new residence permits and had 12 726 migrants approved as refugees – the primary country of origin for new arrivals since 2018 and representing 0.34% of the total Brazilian population (Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela- R4V).

Following Menezes & Cover (2018) migrants, are hereby seen as social subjects active in their migration processes. They make their own choices pre-migration, during it and in resettlement, even though they are usually subjected to constraining circumstances and contexts. They construct and reconstruct themselves as subjects of their own displacement experience, at the work places, the family or even in their forms of association, politics and sociability (Fontes 2004; Alvim, 1997). Resilience, resistance, adaptation and social integration result mainly from the ways migrants and their families deal differentially with the social relationships they are involved in based upon their own consciousness and culture.

2.0 AIMS

The study's main aim is to describe how migrants and refugees in Brazil, in spite of substantive constraints, become actors of their own destiny, nationally and/or transnationally. It intends to answer the following two questions:

- How is migrant agency activated in different realms of life in Brazil as mediated by context?
- Which are the main individual and collective strategies of resilience and resistance implemented by them?

3.0 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

3.1 Main Concepts and Materials

The theoretical approach followed in this study reflects upon a paradigm of migrants and refugees as actors, that base their initiatives on the understanding of everyday experiences (Long, 1992; Long & Van der Ploeg, 1994). This notion is linked to that of agency, based on Giddens's work (2003). Capacities for agency attribute to individual and collective actors the ability to process social experiences and look for ways to deal with their life, even within extreme forms of coercion. These actors can generate knowledge, solve problems, monitor their actions and intervene in the flow of surrounding social events (Long, 1992). Due to these characteristics State governance and management should show much more flexibility than that usually observed.

Within recognition theories, the central premise is that actors pursue recognition, as a fundamental drive to understand world transformations and demand social justice. Charles

Taylor (1997), for example, dwells upon the relational character of identity building, i.e. the importance of subjects' interactions that recurrently look for mutual recognition through dialogue. Schumacher & Salum (2017) emphasize the importance of the social relationships built by migrants and refugees and its recognition in order to guarantee their full autonomy. For example, when their right to vote is not approved, as is the case in Brazil, this can promote a separation between migrants/refugees and the host society because migrants become limited in the exercise of their political activities and rights (Leão, 2017).

Contemporary social movements, without leaving aside labour struggles, are moved by agendas that value culture, identity, multiculturalism, the environment and human rights, as well as ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, the defence of minority groups, and actions against climate change, among other. They expand their struggles with the appropriation of their symbolic, cultural and identity-based demands (De Lima, A. B., & Cartaxo, S. A. B., 2023). Their actions are organized and directed by a series of associations of individuals discontent with their position in the hegemonic social order, or that are committed to defend a specific topic (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). According to Touraine (2006), social movements' perspectives have become predominantly cultural.

The actions of migrants and refugees, amongk the new social movements, have transformed the morphology of social struggles due to their transversal and heterogeneous character. Varela Huerta (2021) states that they result from neoliberal globalization, in a historical context that intensifies frontier control policies. Migrants defend their visibility and the right to be recognized as subjects in their countries of origin, transit and settlement (Marinucci, 2016). According to Leão (2017), there tends to exist a constant (re) negotiation between the actions and positions of social movements, migrant collectives, Brazilian groups and organizations. Mezzadra (2012, p.73) develops an approach on 'migration autonomy', as a process that entails regarding migration as a social movement in a literal sense. "To be understood as a new perspective in the analysis of 'mobility politics'- that emphasizes the subjective dimension internal to the struggles and confrontations that constitute their material ground".

In terms of the transnational dimension, Costa (2003) describes the network of migrant movements that participate in protests articulated continentally. These 'rooted cosmopolitans' get involved in political struggles that require their participation in transnational contact and conflict networks (Tarrow, 2010).

Much of migrant activists' interactions take place digitally. The urban public space of face-to-face interaction combines with the mediated dimension of digital networks, blurring the frontiers between the 'on-line' and 'off-line' worlds during political and other interventions (Lago Martinez, 2015). To study the dynamics of digital network communication means reflecting on new forms of perception, language and sensibility. Digital platforms contribute to deepen hegemonic disputes in relation to the representation of migration, when they widen the possibilities of transnational circulation of these representations.

Migrants and refugees have tended to be depicted, in mainstream migration literature, as passive victims focusing upon their vulnerabilities and overshadowing their agency, most especially in the case of women (Borges 2024; Canning, 2017). For example, women refugees are often depicted as vulnerable within family structures and broader social systems,

reinforcing a limited understanding of their roles (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). However, they often make small-scale choices, everyday actions aimed at survival rather than large-scale emancipatory engagement, such as creating support networks and using digital platforms to maintain their social ties (Sigona, 2014).

Resilience entails the adaptability needed to survive and socially integrate, usually after severe shocks or recurrent adversity (Unger, 2005; Acero, 2024). Resistance can be considered as a response to power from below – a practice that might challenge, negotiate, and undermine power. However, there can be a thin line separating resilience from resistance strategies. In Butler's words (2004), resilience and adaptability become crucial forms of resistance in environments of extreme vulnerability and agency is not always overt or revolutionary but can manifest in subtle, everyday actions. Resilience and resistance can be explored in different dimensions, as a) individual confrontation; b) formally organized in movements c) everyday informal acts; d) sporadic resistance; and e) proxy resistance, that exercised by third parties in solidarity.

In summary, the article is based on the concept of migrants as actors and their agency, a discussion of their main forms of resilience and resistance in different social spheres and the contemporary transnationalization of their demands and struggles through digital media.

3.2 Methods

This study has been designed as one of an exploratory and descriptive nature, which uses secondary data, especially qualitative analysis of information and limited selective statistical data. It consists of a narrative-based, critical review of academic specialized national and international social science literature, an analysis of selected public documents, as well as information produced by relevant migrant and refugee collectives and pro-migrant NGOs in Brazil such as, Caritas-Pares; MAWON, Association Venezuela Global, among other.

First, recent academic articles gathered from specialized national and international journals on migrants' agency, resilience and resistance were retrieved, from journals, such as: *Migraciones Internacionais*, *Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana (REHMU)* and *Polis*. For this purpose, Google Scholar was used and the keywords: "migrant agency"; "migrant resilience"; "migrant resistance"; "refugee agency"; "refugee resilience"; "refugee resistance" AND Brazil. These keywords have been followed up in the titles and contents of the texts selected. This listing was complemented with selective data accessed through using the artificial intelligence (AI) application Gemini to gather more recent information. Very few studies on these topics were found about Brazil that mainly analyse migrants' narratives, experiences and attitudes on agency, resilience and resistance.

Second, articles retrieved were divided into two groups based upon whether their approach to the three topics mentioned was an individual one or a collective one. Within those two sets, a second classification was developed based on the following criteria: visibility, recognition, adaptability, opposition, identity-building, emancipation and the reconfiguration of subjectivity. The content of the literature retrieved was analysed to look for convergences, divergences and minor differences between both extremes, relating the meanings attached to the categories under study and the frequency of their use (Mulkay, 1993).

The article is structured around the most recurrent themes in the literature reviewed: the purpose of national and transnational activism carried out by migrant/refugee collectives often with the support of digital platforms, the specificities of migrant/refugee women's struggles, migrants'/refugees' opposition and adaptation, strategies implemented in the world of work and resilient/ resistance behaviour in relation to health and mental health. Interviewees' narratives found within some of the specialized academic studies that followed a qualitative approach are quoted to illustrate, when possible, the way in which migrants and refugees make sense of their experiences during resettlement.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sections, the main findings of the studies retrieved on Brazilian migrants and refugees are summarized and discussed relating the main issues appearing in this literature. The aim of these sections is to describe main trends on experiences on resilient and resistance strategies among them and illustrate them with selected narratives from different Latin American nationalities of migrants and refugees as a way to show nuances in their forms of agency.

4.1 Transnationalism, Activism and Migrant Collectives

Cogo (2025) reviews six studies carried out between 2015 and 2022 analysing transnational migrant/refugee activism and how the use of digital technologies allows and amplifies it. The author analyses different aspects of these practices: the mobilizing patterns used by activists within digital platforms; the articulation between countries of origin and destiny; the connection and complementarity of political action between digital spaces and public ones; the appropriation of social media's languages; the political and communicational repertoires found among the activists; the relational dimension of activism towards the Nation-States and interculturality as a dimension of migrants' and refugees' transnational activism.

Among mobilizing patterns, the author shows that the most frequently used ones are: the right to their self-representation as migrants, to voting, the occupation of political positions in the host countries, their potential return to their country of origin, the democratization of political processes in their country of origin, complaints on racism and xenophobia suffered in the host country and migration itself, as a right and not as an imposition (e.g. Almeida & Cogo, 2022; Elhajji & Escudero, 2020).

Digital applications sometimes try to align migrants with radical anti-migration discourse. An example was the role played by Venezuelan migrants in their political participation during the Brazilian election campaign of 2022. Testimonies were circulated by Venezuelan migrants and influencers in digital platforms and message applications such as: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, you tube, Whatsapp and Telegram, about the risk of becoming like Venezuela, if the Labour Party (PT) candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, were to win the Presidential elections. Thus, these claims supported the far-right opposition party led by Bolsonaro (Cogo et al., 2023). A Venezuelan influencer, coordinating the digital account @ RumboLibertad (@TowardsFreedom) counting with 105 thousand followers, published narratives and videos addressed to Brazilians about the threat of socialism similar to that found in his country of origin. Zanforlin & Lyra (2023, p.1) suggest that the migrant influencer, as a subject that uses

digital platforms, becomes a synthesis of the neoliberal assumption that “[...] a good migrant is one who mobilizes affection in social media and does not place excessive demands upon the State”.

However, not all migrant digital activism confronts the State. For example, Haitian collectives organized their own fundraising campaigns away from any public institution. The use of digital platforms by the Haitian diaspora favoured the construction of a transnational space linking countries of origin and destiny. They also tried to gain visibility denouncing the racism they experienced in Brazil and showed the counter-narratives they used to confront it. These narratives also questioned ‘the myth of racial democracy as a founding principle of the Brazilian Nation’(Cogo, 2019). At the same time, to better connect with nationals, these activists applied the argument of the shared Afro descendant cultural origin of both nations: Brazil and Haiti. Also, Haitian activists used popular communicational means typical of Latin American communities such as, radio’s oral reports, telenovela genre and comics.

A contrasting counter-narrative to obtain visibility and recognition is also proposed by a Haitian musician and activist in his Facebook profile called, ‘What the media does not show of Haiti’. “[...] we are working in the question of showing the other face of Haiti, because there is enough [talk] on misfortune in Haiti, the media has shown too much [...] We are only showing our beaches, our food, that are wonderful, our hotels, our music, our culture, the good things in our culture. And this has been useful. There are many Brazilians that, watching these photo and video images, already want to travel to Haiti” (Haitian interviewee, In: Cogo, 2025, p.18).

Migrants and refugees grouping together in collectives tend to generate better conditions in order to defend their common rights. These collectives also become forms of socialization and cultural exchange with compatriots or migrants of other nationalities. They highlight the importance of collective strategies of resilience and resistance. (For a detailed explanation of how pro-migration associations, migrant and refugee collectives’ function in Rio de Janeiro see, Acero, 2025). However, sometimes these collectives have severe problems for their regularization due to bureaucratic obstacles found in the Brazilian Migration Law of 2017.

Marinucci (2016) states that the social activism of migrants and refugees, is also useful to demystify popular imaginaries on human displacements through migration when they confront and question reductionist perspectives and establish harmonic relations based upon human rights. Activists’ actions contribute also to reduce the negative impact of the numerous types of overlapping adversities faced by them which exceed subjective and individual demarcations and demand collective monitoring (Patarra & Baeninger, 2006).

In contemporary societies, a peril is gradually growing in migrants’ and refugees’ everyday lives: the constant and increasing threats posed by nationalist and conservative far-right parties. As they are obtaining a significant role in the global political arena, the far-right’s representatives and supporters publicly declare being against migration and migrant communities. They tend to approve discriminatory, xenophobic and excluding norms, decrees and laws, while they promote the sociocultural submission of those migrants and refugees that are already documented (Rosenberg et al., 2018). Paradoxically, this condition of vulnerability

dialectically leads to the upsurge or strengthening of migrant and refugee organizations that defend general rights to citizenship.

When migrant populations use public pressure to effectively exercise their rights, their relationship with their host society is altered and they become more visible to the public eye (Sayad,1999). More so, when they associate in harmonic interactions with locals that also promote similar emancipatory values. This has been the case, for example, of the Bolivian migrants grouped in the collective “YES, I CAN” in São Paulo studied by Nobrega (2014). These Bolivian migrants are working in the local clothing industry since it was restructured within the global market in the 1990s. Another example, is that of the small labour and social associations of Latin American migrants that struggle to improve working conditions and gender equity within the textile sector in São Paulo, as well as, those that fight for decent housing.

Migrant and refugee collectives share and spread the news of the common goals attained, such as: the implementation of institutional initiatives that promote family reunification, the regularization and naturalization of foreigners, the implementation of projects that promote social inclusion and citizenship; the integral guarantee of human rights – access to housing, education , health and social programmes-; the critique of the registration demands made to them; their actions against the devaluation of cultural diversity; their integration into the formal labour market in ways that are congruent with labour rights; as well as, the prevention and fight against any form of discrimination, xenophobia , racism, exclusion and religious intolerance. The number and type of their different protests are recorded in the social media they manage (Marinucci, 2016; Ferreira, 2024; Brumes, 2016).

Among more informal practices of resistance are the use at home and among compatriots of their mother tongue (Grosso, 2010), as well as, the extended practice of marrying or establishing partners with other compatriots. Cavalcanti et al. (2021) comment that since 2016, arrangements between migrant spouses began to have a higher relative participation in the total of marriages, corresponding in 2019 to six times’ increase relative to 2011.

In all these senses, collectives promote migrant and refugees’ resilience and resistance. Their actions are stimulated and favoured also by the use of popular means of communication that allow for more efficient information exchanges. Shared actions between collectives contribute to the possibility of jointly designing public policies favourable to migration and refuge.

4.2 Agency among Female Migrants and Refugees

Female agency can be considered twofold and jointly enacted between: the active challenge and defiance of oppressive structures i.e. a way of emancipatory resistance, and the application of resilience strategies. The last is to be understood as women’s resourcefulness and creativity to make pragmatic choices to adapt and survive within constraining structures; a capacity to recover from adversity and continue pushing forward (Borges, 2025; 2024). In both ways, women migrants assert their agency, i.e. their capacity to act independently and make their own free choices. Moreover, in the context of displacement, many women actively pursue entrepreneurship and professional development as strategies for integration and economic self-sufficiency.

Situations of disrespect tend to permeate different realms where female migrants interact with members of the host society. To confront them and defend their cause, women in Brazil have formed different type of migrant collectives. Among them, can be found: the Coletivo Cio da Terra in the State of Belo Horizonte and the Equipe de Base Warmis in São Paulo. Other collectives deal with the appreciation of cultural and artistic migrant endeavours, e.g. Visto Permanente and Sarau das Américas, or else, some are focused upon struggles to obtain decent housing, such as, the Grupo de Refugiados and Imigrantes Sem-Teto (GRIST).

Migrant women's topics of struggle include: (a) the processes of socialization of migrant women, their emotional relationships and gender roles; (b) the socioeconomic dimension and work; and (c) their access to rights and their experience in politics. At each level, situations of disrespect are experienced but also collectives tend to emphasize the demands made, the counter narratives sustained and their conquests.

Xenophobia, sexism and racism are present in all fields of life, mainly within work dynamics and everyday family experiences. Networks and social movements are also mobilized in Brazil by racialized women and informal workers, among them: Associação de Mulheres Imigrantes Luz e Vida (AMILV); Regularização Já; Justiça Por Moïse; and Vidas Imigrantes Negras Importam (Ferreira, 2024).

Migrant women interviewees who participated in Dornelas' study (2020, p.109) narrated how much the intersection between being a woman and a migrant is limiting and results in deprivation in many social settings: "Many say you cannot." However, these interviewees also state that disrespect can promote struggle and resistance and "make a person stronger"; most specially, when a detrimental situation can revert into "something good", if the role assigned to them by other people is confronted.

Another narrative states: "[...] And also in the South. I got there and felt that sensation that they see you as a foreigner, and if you are a woman walking alone it is as if you were available to be with someone. I perceive this. It is uncomfortable and one feels such a rage [...]" (Joana, Mexican interviewee, In: Dornela, 2020, p.110). In racialized migrant women's narratives often a sense of identity alienation is also transmitted: "I am black. So, since I have arrived here, nobody had ever asked me so much about my colour. Not even in Venezuela. So I say: black. Many times, people have said: "Are you sure/. Black?" [...] Due to being a black woman and from another country, you live a very different life, a very difficult one. [...] To be born as woman and as a black woman are two crosses that one has to carry on one's back, for life" (Cora, Haitian interviewee, In: Dornela, 2020, p.113).

Almakhamreh et al. (2020) argue that understanding refugee women's struggles for education and work in patriarchal societies can highlight their efforts toward gender equality in the realm of survival, manifested in small ways in everyday lives - such as securing food, ensuring their children's safety, or finding informal work. However, their actions should not be overstated as radical forms of resistance (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). Instead, they represent pragmatic choices made within constrained circumstances - a range of responses to adversity, to protect themselves and their families.

4.3 The World of Labour

Migrants and refugees also exercise resilience and resistance in the world of work. Even in strenuous situations of subjugated lack of freedom within realms of forced labour, they implement this type of strategies.

Forced labour, as a concept, is predominantly shaped by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). ILO Convention No.29 defines forced labour as all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily. Critical commentators, have considered that that definition follows a rigid binary division between forced and voluntary labour, masking the heterogeneity existing between different types of labour (O'Connell Davidson, 2010). Alternatively, critiques have used the concept of unfree labour to describe these situations (e.g. Barrientos et al. ,2013).

Agency within resistance strategies to unfree labour can be unpacked into three related terms: resilience, reworking and resistance itself (Katz 2004). Refugees' and asylum seekers' agency implies making choices with dignity even in contexts of lack of freedom. (Waite et al, 2015). Two main types of choices stand out. One is exiting unfree labour with previous notice or just abandoning work. The other involves workers' actions to cope and continue work in severely exploitative labour conditions based upon a determination to obtain survival. 'Walking away' from an unfree situation may offer only some temporary relief for the worker, if that exit involves moving away from one labour situation into other exploitative or precarious survival mechanism.

Another example of resilience and resistance is that of female migrants working in the Brazilian sugarcane mills, as analysed in the studies by Lewis et al. (2015) and Menezes & Cover (2018), among other. This work is highly exploitative, carried out within demeaning working conditions and brings about high risks of disease. Management exercises control not only at work but also at the mills' lodgings where workers reside. Even workers' free time – e.g. feeding-schedules, TV hours – is rigorously ruled, under the excuse that it is the time for workers to rest. But workers generate strategies not to follow these rules. For example, they consume alcohol by forming trustworthy groups that hide drinks out of reach from those other colleagues that might denounce them to the authorities. They share among them specific phrases and languages, gestures and dissimulations to protect their group. They fight using the tactics they have to maintain a certain autonomy (Cearteau, 1994).

The narrative of one of the migrant workers lodging in those premises illustrates his complaints: "I think there should be better hygiene here in the shacks; this does not happen. I am a caretaker and have to look after a large number of shacks like this one here. And you can see what toilets are like! They are washed only once a day; I think it should be twice. About the farm, I do not worry because one knows about the jolt..." The worker adds: "One must learn how to live in shacks". (Neimar, In: Menezes & Cover., 2018, p.85). The concept of a 'shack' illustrates the transitory character the workers assign to their living space.

Workers also react to work vigilance at the production site of the mill in different ways. First, by accepting the conditions imposed to them. Second, through personal confrontations with the mills' supervisors at the time of weighing the cane. In this last case, the firm's sanctions involve being removed to perform worst paid or heavier tasks; be suspended for three days without pay or else be demitted. A third form of resistance, is to ask the trade union representative to

demand weighing the cane once again. Finally, it might mean leaving the mill and searching for a job at another mill located at a greater distance. However, in this last case, if the work-contract is not broken, it hinders the workers' labour continuity as it is registered in his/her professional card and makes her/him to be considered "dirty" or as a "bad worker". This will negatively affect any new intent of future recruitment. As a way of resistance to this stigma, workers allege having lost their professional cards and they get new ones.

The strategy most commonly used among these workers is that of quitting their jobs. This is not only the decision of some individuals, but it is a recurrent and persisting practice among workers. As such, it becomes their main form of resistance. As Scott (1986, p.26) states: "when these [forms of exit] are infrequent and isolated acts, they are of little interest, but when they reveal a consistent pattern (even though not previously coordinated or oriented) we are dealing with resistance."

Entrepreneurship, when supported by public policy and institutional programmes, can also become a mechanism for the resilience, autonomy and identity reconstruction of migrants and refugees. A study was developed by Ferreira & Lohman (2025) with refugees of different nationalities – among them, 39.8% of Venezuelans- participating in a technical course on food production and psychosocial assistance organized by the Centro Federal de Educação Tecnológica Celso Suckow da Fonseca (CEFET/RJ) of Rio de Janeiro in partnership with the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Migrants' participation in this course illustrated that technical training, linguistic support and community networks play a decisive role in their productive integration, while legal barriers and the recognition of foreign degrees are overcome through creative and innovative solutions.

Participants' narratives show that entrepreneurship is experienced not only as an alternative to labour exclusion but also as a means to grieve losses, traumas and identity ruptures provoked by forced displacement, as well as to reconstruct belonging. Migrant interviewees summarize their experiences in the extracts below:

"My business is more than earning money. It is a part of me that I have brought with me from my country. When I am cooking, I remember my mother, my childhood." (Haitian interviewee, In: Ferreira & Lohman, 2025, p. 10)

"Here I started with nothing, but when I opened my sewing atelier, it was as if I had recovered a part of my history." (Venezuelan interviewee, In: Ferreira & Lohman, 2025, p. 10).

To develop, maintain and expand their businesses the emotional and relational support these migrants obtain is determinant. Family, religious communities, compatriots, friends and local solidarity networks were quoted as fundamental sources of support. They function as exchange and learning channels to strengthen mutual trust. These networks are sources for developing collective resilience strategies, often substituting for the absence of more effective public policies. To solve obstacles, refugees look for innovative solutions as resilient strategies, such as the digitalization of sales through applications, informal partnerships with Brazilians, the use of social media for marketing and the adaptation of their products to the local culture.

4.4 Health and Mental Health: Policies and Resilience

There are few States in Brazil that have been publicly engaged in developing specific protection strategies for migrants' and refugees' mental health and well-being. São Paulo is a relevant case of a local government having designed specific policies aiming to include its migrant population into primary-level healthcare; a pioneering local migration policy set up in 2012.

In recent years, the national public health service (SUS) has been severely affected by neoliberal austerity policies, conducive to the underfunding and precariousness of care, in a country where the vast majority of people rely on public healthcare. This situation has affected migrants substantively (Ocke-Reis et al., 2023). Moreover, the management of health services has been delegated to Brazilian municipalities.

Several initiatives were devised to induce the participation of migrants and relevant NGOs in the design of public norms and policies. Key initiatives undertaken have been: passing the Municipal Law 16,478, on the Policy for Immigrants; creating the Municipal Immigrants' Council (CMI) and the Municipal Plan for Immigrant Policies (2021), as the main outcome of the 2nd Municipal Conference on Policies for Immigrants held in late 2019. Two international United Nations organizations- the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHRC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)- have decisively contributed to fill in policy gaps and find a seat at the policymaking sessions.

Results from a major study by Martins (2025) show that linguistic barriers pose major challenges to healthcare, causing misunderstandings between patients and health staff, in consultations, treatment and follow-ups, as other studies have also documented (e.g. Carneiro Jr. et al., 2022). Also, different conceptions on health and hygiene, gender roles and religious beliefs – cultural traits that characterize different migrants' nationalities- make it harder to deliver good quality care. Another important barrier to healthcare access are xenophobic manifestations by public health workers and discrimination often held against migrants, prioritizing services for Brazilians over migrants. Brazilian patients may also express their prejudice against migrants considering their demand for health treatment as excessive, or else, expressing that “migrants are undeserving of care”. A health worker interviewed in this study says: “I’ve already heard Brazilian patients complain during a visit. They said ‘there are only foreigners there’, ‘they give much more attention to the foreigners.’ (...) It takes longer at the reception, of course, because I must understand what they’re saying, so it takes longer, People say something like ‘I don’t know what these people have come here for, to take over our places and they don’t even speak our language’”.

These flaws can be partially compensated by the regular home visits of teams with a communitarian approach, based upon the Strategy for Family Health (ESF), to tackle migrant patients' absenteeism due to long working hours and precarious housing conditions (e.g. Martin et al., 2022). Two other factors that disrupt the possibility of good migrant healthcare are: the lack of training on specific skills and tools where migrants' health carers can participate, as well as data scarcity and neglect on migrants' health (Steffens & Martins, 2016; Ventura & Yujra, 2019). The initiatives on healthcare in São Paulo are then to be considered predominantly reactive, with interventions often emerging in response to immediate pressures from civic society rather than as part of a long-term strategy. These gaps then tend to be filled by migrant collectives, NGOs working on their behalf or through the resilient strategies developed among migrants themselves.

It has been well-established that the migration process is a key determinant of health and mental health, given that international migrants are more severely exposed to suffer physical and/or psychological traumas (Acero; Zuleta Pastor, 2025). This is due to their constant exposition to stressful events such as, flight through dangerous routes, sleep deprivation, insufficient nutrition, forced separation from family, constant feelings of uncertainty and fear, stigmatization and prejudice. However, in spite of being exposed to considerable adversities and vulnerabilities, evidence has also suggested that they can become resilient (Juliano & Yunes, 2014).

Resilience contributes to a better life quality, self-efficacy and self-esteem; it functions as a protection factor of mental health, when it reduces the level of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression and enables establishing strong relationships with family and friends, strengthening faith and religion (Roberto & Moleiro, 2016). Aspects that favour resilience include maintaining cultural identity, the availability of social support and the development of a sensation of belonging and security within the host society (Julca, 2011).

However, it is often estimated that mental health disturbances show higher rates of prevalence among migrants and refugees. In spite of this, mental health stigma prevalent in Latin America, significantly contributes to the underreporting of the number of cases (Mascayano, et al. 2016).

A study developed by Barreto et al. (2024) identified the variables associated to perceived stress among international migrants and which influence the development of a better or worse level of resilience. To be black or brown, not to have a religion and having lived in the host society for less than five years, were detrimental factors to develop resilience. Instead, greater resilience was found among those not divorced/separated, those with up to eight years of study and a monthly family earning of a hundred US dollars or beyond.

In another study, carried out by Josic et al. (2025) with Venezuelan migrant women in Brazil, the authors have shown that a central component of resilience is 'perceived psychosocial support' (PPS). This concept refers to the emotional, practical, and social resources that individuals believe are available to them through their support networks, which can include family, friends, co-workers, community organizations, and social institutions, among other. PPS encompasses various types of support, such as: practical (assistance with daily tasks), tangible (provision of resources like food or money) and emotional (reassurance, empathy and advice). Resilience, in turn, is associated with improvements in psychological well-being, such as an increase in hope, self-confidence, emotional intimacy, and the use of healthy coping strategies.

Selected results of this study show that 65% of participants were highly resilient and they reported being able to cope 'all of the time'; they were generally positively associated with PPS (39% versus 23% of those with low resilience level), were older, roughly half of them had settled in Brazil for less than a year and a majority had children. Meanwhile, 35% of the women surveyed belonged to a low resilience group, who were hardly ever able to cope. To this group also belonged respondents using alcohol and drugs, having a disability, or experiencing mental health issues. Having or not a partner did not influence substantively their ability to cope – 42.6% (single) versus 47.1 % (with a partner or married); 91% reported very good health, in spite that 49.8% considered themselves as poor. Surprisingly, the study indicated that neither

LGBTQ+ self-identification nor ethnicity were significantly correlated with resilience. The first result can respond to the fact that few women surveyed identified in those terms. The second finding suggests that the role of ethnicity in Venezuelan migrant women's resilience is complex and may be shaped more by cross-national socio-political contexts than by ethnicity alone.

Women in general face additional vulnerabilities. They are particularly vulnerable to gendered threats, such as intimate partner violence, sexual assault, early unions, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, survival and transactional sex, which tend to be more acute among migrant women. Due to gendered migrant stigma, Venezuelan migrant women face heightened exposure to threats to their well-being, such as hyper-sexualization and police extortion. Resilience protects against the impacts of these threats through mental, emotional, and behavioural adaptations.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

In Brazil, there is a dearth of social science literature dealing with migrant and refugee resilient and resistance strategies, while this type of studies are prospering in the Global North (e.g. Walther et.al, 2021; Borges, 2024; 2025). The Brazilian studies reviewed tend to contribute with examples on the behaviour and / or narratives of migrants on agency in certain circumstances, most especially in the world of work and during occupational training. Other contributions entail how migrants and refugees participate in transnational networks of activism- digital or not- that support their own resilience and resistance strategies. In this way, studies often show how new social movements involving migrants are built and expand. In relation to health and mental health, practices of adaptive resilience are illustrated by the review only when these populations have access to public health-care, which tends to be entangled with uninformed stereotypes and high discrimination towards migrants and refugees among care-takers and the public at large. Some of the articles analysed also deal with the main characteristics of the daily individual resilience strategies implemented. Considering the main dimensions of resilience and resistance outlined in section 2 of this paper, the studies' reviewed findings show that individual confrontation among migrants and refugees is scarce in Brazil and sporadic resistance takes place in everyday informal acts, individually or collectively, especially among women migrants. Formally organized migrant movements are still few, though on the rise, and NGO's solidarity, or proxy resistance, becomes one of the main forms of protection of migrants' and refugees' rights.

However, only some of the studies reviewed deal with gender issues. Moreover, among them, gender is analysed as a homogeneous category. An intersectional approach to gender relations, i.e. by race, class and ethnicity, is often omitted.

As a first limitation, the studies lack an exploration of the socioeconomic contexts in which these migrants' attitudes and reflections develop. A second limitation is that of the methodologies often used in the studies. For example, to carry out a sound analysis of resilience and resistance, a quality-oriented and/or participant approach is often more suitable as migrants grouped in collectives might show openly the strategies they implement. But they might be unwilling or threatened to disclose them when interviewed individually. They might also

practice resilient attitudes without having awareness that they are engaged in them, for example, when they use only their mother tongue at home or among compatriots.

Coming back to the initial questions that oriented this study, agency seems to be always present among migrants and refugees in Brazil, as far as, they are not regarded as victims or passive recipients of State aid and support in order to officially manage international migration. Actually, the lack of public policies for the protection of their rights activates their potential for agency, though directed to different aims. Agency in the present study has been addressed from a nuanced perspective and findings include small everyday activities of adaptation and opposition among migrants and refugees, as well as more encompassing endeavours to struggle for human rights and emancipation. The realms of life where migrants' resilience seem to manifest most openly are at the workplace and/or when they are supported by networks, be them, family, relatives, friends or the religious, social organizations and collectives to which they belong. Often, this trend manages to persist regardless of their level of integration into the host society. Meanwhile, resistance strategies are integrated into transnational migrant and refugee activism.

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