



A woman with disabilities reads in her bed at the Coroado Shelter in Manaus.

Photo credit: UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo

Out of the shadows: the precarious lives of Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers in Brazil

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LGBTQI+ Venezuelans are among the most vulnerable groups in what has become one of the fastest-growing refugee crises in the world (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/12/09/venezuela-refugee-crisis-to-become-the-largest-and-most-underfunded-in-modern-history/>), suffering xenophobia, homophobia, extreme violence and exploitation. An unlikely beacon of hope lies in the middle of the Amazon, where the staff of Casa Miga work to protect and empower them. As the only

centre for LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers in Latin America, the Manaus-based shelter houses Venezuelans who have travelled thousands of kilometres to escape violence, hunger and economic collapse, often encountering yet more hardship along the way. This article explores the complex intersectionality of Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers and refugees in Brazil, considering both the social and political elements at play, while demonstrating the need for increased support from the humanitarian sector.

Venezuela

People are leaving Venezuela in unprecedented numbers. Since the crisis there intensified in 2015, 4.6 million have fled the country (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/12/09/venezuela-refugee-crisis-to-become-the-largest-and-most-underfunded-in-modern-history/>). By the end of 2020, between 6.5 million and 8 million (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/12/09/venezuela-refugee-crisis-to-become-the-largest-and-most-underfunded-in-modern-history/>) Venezuelans could be living abroad. This is one of the largest ongoing humanitarian crises in the world.

Families with children, the elderly, the disabled and women – many of whom are pregnant – make up the majority of Venezuelans who have left.

(<https://www.unhcr.org/venezuela-emergency.html>) Asylum-seekers are often forced to take irregular routes, some falling victim to traffickers, smugglers or other armed groups. Many arrive in host countries with little or no documentation, making them particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, human trafficking, violence and discrimination – including those who travel to Brazil.

Brazil

Since 2018, 264,000 Venezuelans have applied for asylum in Brazil

(<https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmnn/politics-news-pmnn/u-s-backs-program-to-settle-venezuelan-migrants-in-brazil>), though the Brazilian military estimates that 900,000 have entered the country since 2018, with 500 arriving in the northern state of Roraima every day.

The Brazilian government's reaction to the crisis has been mixed. Some observers have praised the Brazilian government's efforts (<https://www.utoronto.ca/news/brazil-s-humane-refugee-policies-good-ideas-can-travel-north-u-t-expert-says>) to respond to the crisis. However, some Brazilian politicians are contributing to a wave of xenophobic rhetoric. With nationalism on the rise and a far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, in office, the trend of heightened violence, xenophobia and homophobia shows no sign of abating. Bolsonaro has openly referred to refugees as 'the scum of the earth' (<https://exame.abril.com.br/brasil/bolsonaro-chama-refugiados-de-escoria-do-mundo/>), and stated that he would prefer his son dead rather than gay. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/world/americas/brazil-president-jair-bolsonaro-quotes.html>)

The president's comments stoked more violence towards LGBTQI+ people in a country that already has some of the highest rates of anti-LGBTQI+ (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/22/brazil-lgbt-violence-deaths-all-time-high-new-research>) violence in the world. Stories of xenophobic violence towards Venezuelans have made headlines (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/19/world/americas/residents-pacaraima-brazil-border-town-attack-venezuela-migrants-camp.html>), including public beatings and shelters being firebombed.

Why go to Brazil?

Fleeing from Venezuela to Brazil is a daunting task. To succeed, you must navigate dense rainforest and pass through several nearly inaccessible crossing points. Northern Brazil, where asylum-seekers first arrive, is underdeveloped and has some of

the country's highest poverty levels. Language is yet another barrier to new arrivals, making communication highly challenging.



Brazil's economy is the largest in Latin America: the country is often viewed as a land of opportunity, and many Venezuelans believe they would be better off starting a new life in Brazil. Gabriel, a Venezuelan asylum-seeker who crossed the border into the north of Brazil and ventured south to Manaus, explained 'I came to Brazil because I thought I could find work and have a life'. The reality is that Brazil is still recovering from recession and unemployment is high. Economic inequality is a significant problem.

The journey to Manaus

Border communities in Roraima are struggling to accommodate the influx. Many hospitals and public schools are dangerously overcrowded. Without homes or formal work, Venezuelans are often forced to beg on the streets. Mothers of small children are particularly vulnerable, and frequently end up in sex work.

The town of Pacaraima is just one example of the crisis in the state. With an original population of 12,000, Pacaraima has sustained an influx of over 2,000 Venezuelan asylum-seekers since 2018, most of whom live on the streets or in tents. Public school attendance has increased by 400%. Tensions have risen to the point that an angry mob of Brazilians (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/28/brazils-closed-door-policy-venezuela-refugee/?fbclid=IwAR0UuvVLNhbS5yN34mPPyyp249ZoeYJXXNRxManuRwgS351mQCenPqrMGvM>) stormed a refugee community, attacking Venezuelans and setting tents on fire, forcing the federal government to deploy 3,000 troops to restore order. Given the area's instability, over-stretched services and scarce opportunities, many asylum-seekers and refugees venture further south to Manaus in hopes of more support.

The path that Manaus-bound asylum-seekers find, however, runs through exceedingly treacherous terrain. Only one main road enters the city from the north. One LGBTQI+ asylum-seeker called Julio recalled walking ‘over 1,000 kilometres on rough roads and through thick rainforest’ to reach the city. On the way he was picked up from the side of the road, taken into the middle of the jungle, stripped of his possessions and ‘left there to die’. Luckily Juan managed to find another road and, ultimately, reach Manaus. Too many others have not been – and will not be – so lucky.

Casa Miga

At the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) centre in Manaus, Venezuelan asylum-seekers are asked a series of questions, some of which involve identity and sexuality, to determine their needs. Some are referred to Casa Miga, a year-old collaboration between UNHCR and local charity Manifesta LGBT+ (<https://www.facebook.com/manifestaLGBT/>). There they receive health care, educational opportunities, help obtaining documentation and employment training. Residents stay for three months, with extensions for people in particularly desperate need. Casa Miga is maintained by 10 volunteers.

Generally, UNHCR and their shelters are viewed negatively by the Brazilian public. Lucas Brito, Casa Miga’s manager, tells of how ‘people yell slurs at me when I walk down the street with my UN bag’. He believes some of the anger towards the UN is because it is seen as being funded by ‘the powerful countries who are causing the displacement of people in the first place, and bringing refugees into their communities, causing social tension’. These negative views also fuel anger and violence towards asylum-seekers and refugees.

LGBTQI+ Venezuelan asylum-seekers

We were the first foreign researchers granted access to Casa Miga and permitted to

interview its residents. We interviewed eight in November 2019, all of whom reported discrimination both while travelling to and since arriving in Manaus. As Juan puts it, 'we are treated as slaves'. Venezuelan asylum-seekers and refugees in Manaus and elsewhere accuse employers of taking advantage of desperate migrants and exploiting their labour, (<https://g1.globo.com/ce/ceara/noticia/2018/10/09/venezuelana-foge-de-casa-de-professora-onde-era-mantida-sob-trabalho-escravo-no-ceara.ghtml>) often withholding pay. Another interviewee, Carlos, claimed to have complained to the police, only to be beaten to the point that his jaw was broken.

LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers in Brazil who identify as transgender are in an especially precarious position. Their identity has become politicised, and they often become targets for some of the most vicious violence and discrimination. Natalia, a Venezuelan trans woman, experienced this firsthand on the day she was to settle in Casa Miga. While walking from UNHCR's centre to the shelter, she was targeted by a group of male assailants who beat her and publicly shaved her head. She was left traumatised, but the police were not interested in her case because she is Venezuelan.

Guilliani, another trans resident of Casa Miga, works as a prostitute, typically operating in one of Manaus' central squares. One day, she was accused of stealing someone's phone and, on hearing this, a local couple became violent. Guilliani escaped back to the shelter, but the couple followed her and broke through the front doors, proceeding to beat her in the living room as others watched. The police were called, but again 'they did not do anything as [Guilliani] is Venezuelan'.

What needs to happen

Asylum-seekers and refugees

We asked our interviewees what they needed in order to be safe in Brazil. Most

suggestions were connected to Casa Miga's lack of resources. If the centre's funding were increased, many issues could be resolved.



Asylum-seekers hoped for more nutritious food. Currently, meals consist mostly of rice and beans with no protein. They also stressed the importance of language lessons. Without understanding basic Portuguese, they are unlikely to find employment, and when they do, employers typically take advantage of them.

Interviewees also said they wanted more space. Despite high demand, the shelter can only house 10–16 residents at a time. More funding could purchase more beds, and even enable a move to a larger facility.

Many of the asylum-seekers we interviewed are well-educated, but are restricted from working in their field. Several indicated the need for an effective mechanism to recognise and validate foreign degrees, but Brazil has yet to develop such a system (<https://g1.globo.com/am/amazonas/noticia/2020/01/27/biologa-e-doutora-venezuelana-que-vive-no-am-e-primeira-refugiada-a-ter-diploma-revalidado-vou-poder-retribuir-o-que-brasil-fez-por-mim.ghtml>). As one example, the Federal Board of Medicine has not held an exam to accredit the country's foreign-educated doctors in over two years. These challenges push asylum-seekers and refugees towards dangerous employment with poor working conditions.

Lastly, residents desired more protection from the police. Officers have abused asylum-seekers and do not take their claims seriously. This issue could be partly addressed by increasing asylum-seekers' access to legal services.

Policies

Existing policies to help refugees are seen as promising (<https://www.utoronto.ca/news/brazil-s-humane-refugee-policies-good-ideas-can-travel-north-u-t-expert-says>)

by some academics, and the country is a leader in Latin America regarding refugee intake. However, the government's current efforts do not address LGBTQI+ refugees' unique challenges.

Actions by President Bolsonaro and his administration have significantly harmed the LGBTQI+ community, including cuts to STI prevention programmes, a move which has led to spikes in HIV/AIDS rates (<https://www.dw.com/en/world-aids-day-hiv-infections-rise-in-brazil/a-51482393>) around the country. Immediately after taking power, Bolsonaro also dismissed all federal councils (<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/05/entenda-decreto-que-poe-fim-a-conselhos-federais-com-atuacao-da-sociedade.shtml>) that had previously worked to develop pro-LGBTQI+ policies.

In addition, the evangelical community has gained substantial power during the current administration, which has shifted the policy debate in the Chamber of Deputies towards a so-called fight for morality and the 'Brazilian Family'. There is open condemnation of LGBTQI+ people within both Congress and the Church, institutions whose power is increasing alongside a supportive president. This situation makes implementing any sort of public policy related to the LGBTQI+ rights of refugees extremely challenging, and the few existing policies for refugees do not account for gender identity or sexual orientation.

As it stands, Casa Miga receives no funding from municipal, state or federal governments. In general, the federal government has no intention of helping the LGBTQI+ community, and since the bulk of LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers arrive in the country's most underdeveloped regions, the likelihood of support from states and municipalities with other priorities is low. Thus, the burden falls on the humanitarian sector to support LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers and refugees in Brazil.

In what seems a promising first step, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently launched a

programme to resettle tens of thousands of Venezuelan migrants in Brazil

(<https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/politics-news-pmn/u-s-backs-program-to-settle-venezuelan-migrants-in-brazil?fbclid=IwAR2LZ5P1wz66DwswjPZe6t0poOG-ZCxBVrhagsai8dGbtVK8hEm6y6lRiU>). The \$4 million initiative is expected to fund programmes providing access to language courses, business training and formal employment. However, given that there are more than 265,000 Venezuelans (<https://www.iom.int/venezuela-refugee-and-migrant-crisis>) in Brazil, \$4 million represents just \$19 per refugee – and others are continuing to enter the country at an average rate of 500 per day (<https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/politics-news-pmn/u-s-backs-program-to-settle-venezuelan-migrants-in-brazil?fbclid=IwAR2LZ5P1wz66DwswjPZe6t0poOG-ZCxBVrhagsai8dGbtVK8hEm6y6lRiU>).

In May 2019, the UN launched consultations on how to ensure that LGBTQI+ refugees can be better protected from harm and seek justice when faced with violence and discrimination. Additionally, UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi recently stated (<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/5/5cdd901b7/idadhot-unhcr-launching-consultations-lgbti-refugees-rights.html>) 'It is vital that we create safe spaces for LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers and refugees so they don't feel compelled to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity in an effort to protect themselves ... We should all play an active role in combating homophobia, transphobia and biphobia'.

The result of the UN consultations is a call for states and other actors involved in refugee protection to recognise the unique vulnerability and specific needs of LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse asylum-seekers and refugees. It also called for a recognition of the multiple challenges and threats that LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers face at all stages of displacement, including violence, discrimination, difficulty accessing humanitarian services and the barriers to articulating their protection needs during the intake process.

In the end, UNHCR must work to address the protection gap for LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers, bolster LGBTI-inclusive protection programming and strengthen advocacy efforts so that more centres like Casa Miga can help to address the complex needs of LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers.

All the names of asylum-seekers used in this article are pseudonyms. No real names were used in order to protect their privacy and safety.

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