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Networks of South–South Queer Forced Migration: LGBTQ+ Venezuelans in Northern Brazil During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of the pandemic on the social capital of Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants in northern Brazil. Based on 56 surveys and 28 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Manaus, 10 key informant interviews with politicians, NGOs, and UN staff in Brazil and participant observations in various shelters in northern Brazil, this paper shed light on the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants during the pandemic and emphasize the importance of diverse social networks in providing support. Social capital research suggests that bonding social capital is crucial during crises. However, for respondents who face strained relationships with their families due to cultural and religious disapproval of their sexual orientation or gender identity, bonding ties were not a significant source of support before or during the pandemic. Instead, bridging ties with locals and linking ties with the government played more significant roles.

1 | Introduction

Queer migration literature predominantly addresses south-to-north migration, thereby neglecting the phenomenon of south-to-south queer migration (Vidal-Ortiz 2013; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Ruiz 2017; Stang 2019). This oversight is particularly pressing in the case of Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants in Brazil, a context shaped by a complex interplay between state-led humanitarian responses, grassroots mobilisations, and the specific vulnerabilities of sexual and gender minorities.

The displacement crisis from Venezuela, triggered by the collapse of oil prices in 2014 and deepened by authoritarian governance and economic breakdown, has resulted in over 7.9 people fleeing the country—85% of whom remain in Latin America (R4V 2025). Brazil has become a leader in this response. Renowned for its strong economy, LGBTQ+ rights progress, and positive response to refugees, including Haitians in 2010 and Syrians in 2013, Brazil is an attractive destination country (Jubilut 2018;

Pacífico and Ramos, 2015; Kingston 2016). In response to the growing influx of Venezuelans through the northern border states of Roraima and Amazonas, the Brazilian government, in partnership with UNHCR and other actors, launched *Operation Acolhida* (Operation Welcome) in 2018 (dos Santos Vasconcelos 2022; Government of Brazil 2024). This initiative includes border management, shelter provision, and a large-scale relocation effort to integrate migrants into other parts of the country.

However, the formal humanitarian apparatus—including Brazil's Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS)—has historically prioritised women and children (Gupta et al. 2023), overlooking the needs of LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants (França and Fontgaland 2020; Dos Santos and Costa 2020). In this institutional gap, grassroots organizations have emerged as critical actors. Many LGBTQ+ Venezuelans, particularly those who exit or avoid the formal shelter system, rely on local civil society groups that provide safe housing, legal support and culturally competent psychosocial services. These organisations operate as "linking social

capital" (Woolcock 2002), connecting marginalized individuals to broader systems of care and protection that formal institutions frequently overlook. One of the key findings of this research is the need to highlight the important role of smaller grassroots organisations as forms of linking social capital, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. These organisations are able to reach the LGBTQ+ population in ways that international and governmental organisations cannot.

However, the political climate in Brazil compounds the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ migrants. Although Brazil is often portrayed as an LGBTQ+ rights leader in the Global South, the rise of right-wing populism under Jair Bolsonaro ushered in an era of increased hostility towards sexual and gender minorities (Yates 2022; Bergamo 2020; França, 2017). Homophobic rhetoric, often couched in religious morality and amplified by evangelical leaders, has become normalised in mainstream politics (Valiquette 2017; Galego 2022). While the election of President Lula da Silva in 2023 marked a political shift, anti-LGBQ+ violence remains widespread, with Brazil holding the global record for trans murders for more than a decade (Pinheiro 2022). This broad hostility seeps into the refugee and migrant reception landscape, where the experiences of homophobia and transphobia faced by Venezuelan LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and migrants in the borderlands of northern Brazil reveal a stark contrast between reputation and reality (Valiquette et al. 2020; França, 2023). This violence is compounded by research that has shown that LGBTQ+ individuals experience higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, mental health issues, and poverty compared to those in the gender and sexual majority in Brazil (Su et al. 2021; Su 2023, OAS and R4V 2021).

Despite Brazil's welcoming reputation, the experiences of homophobia and transphobia faced by Venezuelan LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and migrants in the borderlands of northern Brazil reveal a stark contrast between reputation and reality (Valiquette et al. 2020; França, 2023). These disparities highlight the intersectional identities and social positions which shape their experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in their host country but also within the humanitarian landscape (Teixeira 2015; Su 2023). Given this unique context, understanding the interests of south–south refugee reception, the role of grassroots organisations, the challenges LGBTQ+ migrants face and the support networks available to them is crucial for migration studies and humanitarian scholarship.

Our fieldwork, conducted in the key reception sites of Pacaraima, Boa Vista and Manaus, further reveals how these forces converge. Based on 56 surveys and 28 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Manaus, 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) with politicians and NGOs staff in Brazil, and participant observations in refugee shelters in Manaus, Boa Vista and Pacaraima, our findings illuminate the challenges queer migrants faced in northern Brazil during the pandemic. While the prevailing approach in the humanitarian sector is to move towards self-reliance, leaning on social capital as the 'capital of the poor' (Gertler et al. 2006), our findings show that it cannot be assumed that all refugees can rely on their social capital ties to access assistance and resources. Instead, in Manaus, a city that functions as both a relocation destination and a transit hub, LGBTQ+ migrants found vital support through a locally run LGBTQ+ refugee organization—one of the first of its kind in Latin America (2022; 2020). This organisation exemplified how grassroots efforts can address the nuanced needs of queer migrants through tailored, community-driven programming. Moreover, our findings underscore the complex social capital dynamics among Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants during COVID-19, offering insights into the challenges marginalized groups face in crises and emphasizing the importance of diverse social networks for resilience and support.

Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic further illuminated the fragility of state and international systems in responding to intersectional precarity (Su 2023). During lockdowns, *Operation Acolhida*'s relocation scheme stalled, while infection hotshots like Manaus became epicentres for both viral spread and humanitarian neglect (UNHCR 2020, 2021). Many LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants reported a breakdown in bonding ties—traditional networks of family and kin—and increased reliance on linking ties such as NGOs and informal networks. While SUAS played a role in emergency cash transfers, *Auxílio Emergencial*, the state's focus on bureaucratic efficiency left marginalised populations navigating increasingly informal channels for care.

This case demonstrates that LGBTQ+ challenges in south–south migration contexts cannot be addressed solely through state-led or internationally coordinated responses. Grassroots organisations serve not only as stopgap measures but as structurally essential actors that mediate the shortcomings of formal institutions. In Brazil, these organisations have filled critical service haps, challenged dominated narratives about refugee vulnerability and carved out spaces of dignity and safety for queer migrants. A more holistic refugee governance model must recognise and fund these actors as integral—not auxiliary—components of protection systems in the Global South.

2 | Theory and Literature Review

This section presents the Network Theory of Social Capital and how it intersects and applies to the context of south–south queer forced migration. Through explaining some of the conventional thinking around social capital, we aim to illustrate areas where these frameworks apply and may not apply in the case of LGBTQ+ people because they are particularly vulnerable within their ethnic community and family structure due to the rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity within these communities. Thus, more research is needed to understand their cultural and context-specific relationships with social capital.

2.1 | Network Theory of Social Capital

The concept of social capital has been a major focus in migration research for many years (Boyd 1989; Faist and Özveren, 2004; Mulder and Malmberg 2014). Pierre Bourdieu (1985) first introduced social capital as part of a threefold distinction between economic, social and cultural capital, arguing that that social networks must be constructed through investment of economic and cultural resources. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1991, 119) define social capital as 'the sum of resources, actual or moving through social networks that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue

of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition'.

Researchers typically classify social capital into three categories: bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Aldrich 2012; Woolcock 1998; Kyne and Aldrich 2019). Bonding social capital generally refers to relationships among closely connected individuals, such as family members, neighbours and close friends. Usually, bonding ties are significant in a crisis because these people would be immediately aware of your absence and are motivated to assist you if you are in danger. Bridging social capital refers to weak ties between individuals who spend less time together and have less in common, such as having different ethnic backgrounds with similar economic status and political influence. Linking social capital is relationships with individuals who hold positions of influence in formal organizations, such as schools, the police or local and national government entities and can often facilitate the flow of services and assistance.

The Network Theory of Social Capital, as conceptualized by Lin (2008, 51), defines social capital as 'resources embedded in one's social networks, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in their networks'. This approach recognizes the dynamic nature of networks, and the social efforts required to build social capital (Schapendonk 2014). It also acknowledges the agency that refugees and migrants possess and moves away from the idea that they have moved away from their support systems back home and are whole dependent on the services of their host country (Lamba and Krahn 2003). From a theoretical perspective, the difference here is that Lin identifies between accessing versus mobilizing a resource through ties is important. The key is access to resources through ties in your network, which does not mean you can 'mobilize' that tie to get resources when needed.

2.2 | The Network Theory of Social Capital and South–South Queer Forced Migration

The Network Theory of Social Capital is particularly relevant to the context of south–south queer forced migration, where access is necessary, yet alone insufficient for securing support from humanitarian actors, the state and one's social network. Simply having a connection to a humanitarian worker, politician, or relative in your host country does not translate into the mobilization of financial or material aid. For the LGBTQI+ community, factors including discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia or a combination make access and mobilization even more challenging. Thus, having an analytical framework that clearly distinguishes access from mobilization is conceptually appropriate and also instrumental in informing policies that effectively address the complexities of resource allocation and support in the context of queer migration.

It is very common for humanitarian organizations and states to claim that they are LGBTQ+ friendly, but their actual practices are not. For example, humanitarian organizations often do not recognize LGBTQ+ couples or LGBTQ+ people who function as a chosen families as a 'household' which is often defined as marriage between a man and a woman (Outright International 2024). This lack of recognition often means these couples and families

are denied lifesaving food and assistance, shelter and other important basic needs. Thus, while these LGBTQ+ migrants and refugees have access to assistance, their marginalization in society means they cannot mobilize that access into material support or assistance. Utilizing this lens of social capital is helpful to understanding the social dynamics of south–south queer forced migration.

Queer migration literature highlights that it is common for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers to experience heightened feelings of alienation when arriving in their destination community (Heller 2009; Reading and Rubin 2011). Furthermore, bonding social capital is often the main source of financial, social and emotional support during and after crises (Aldrich 2012; Elliott et al. 2010). However, while non-LGBTQ+ asylum seekers have the support of immediate family members, friends, or other members of their persecuted groups, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers often are alone in their migration because of their sexual orientation or gender identity means they experience discrimination and lateral violence within their ethnic communities and families (Hopkinson et al. 2017; Andrade 2019; Bhagat 2020; Cragnolini 2013; Badali 2019) Thus, frameworks or conventional thinking around social capital, refugees and crises do not necessarily apply to the LGBTQ+ community. Our study contributes research to understand the cultural and context-specific relationships that LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants have with social capital. This understanding can help ensure that future research and policies on LGBTQ+ migrants are culturally sensitive to the discrimination and violence that LGBTQ+ individuals experience in their own diaspora as well as their unique experience and use of social capital.

Connecting with bridging ties, is often seen as a great opportunity to maximize one's access to resources beyond their bonding ties and usual networks (Woolcock 1998). Excessive reliance on ethnic and bonding capital hinders integration and feelings of belonging and can impact effective integration (Evergeti and Zontini 2006; Bauder 2008; Karimi 2020). However, cultural differences contribute to isolation as the LGBTQ+ diaspora often struggles to connect with local LGBTQ+ communities (Mole et al. 2014) while facing harassment from their ethnic community (Portman and Weyl 2013; Shidlo and Ahola 2013). Researchers argue that internal group differences give rise to inclusion and exclusion systems that determine individuals' access to social capital, influenced by gender, sexuality, class, religion, and age (Woolcock 1998). Also, due to previous persecution from community and family members, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers' ability to trust new support systems can be hindered, impacting social capital development (Herman 1992; Shidlo and Ahola 2013).

Studies on the impact of displacement and crises on LGBTQ+ people in Haiti (Gorman-Murray et al. 2014), Indonesia (Balgos et al. 2012), and the Philippines (Gaillard 2011) found that sexual and gender minority refugees face increased stigmatization and discrimination from the public, other asylum seekers and NGOs after disasters. This increases their marginalization (Camminga 2021; Larkin 2019). While research shows that LGBTQ+ minorities have ways of supporting one another, especially those from the same ethnic group, crises such as COVID-19 disrupt these support networks (Camminga 2021). Consequently, marginalized groups rely more on NGOs for resources during crises, as they

are often left out of government responses (Almohamed and Vyas 2019).

Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ refugees still face challenges in finding NGOs and humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian responses and many programs and policies designed for COVID-19 recovery overlook gender and sexual minorities (OHCHR 2020; Cowper-Smith et al. 2020). As such, LGBTQ+ refugees often must seek assistance from grassroots organizations like LGBTQ+ shelters or NGOs. In addition, due to their historical exclusion from humanitarian policy considerations, LGBTQ+ refugees often lack the ability to easily navigate a humanitarian system, forcing them to rely instead on grassroots organizations that have small budgets and are less resilient to changes in the funding landscape (Camminga 2021).

Their intersecting precarity (Su 2023) as a sexual and gender minority and of precarious legal status made LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees made them prone to exclusion from COVID-19 policies that had blind spots for both the LGBTQ+ and migrant community. In an earlier study, Su et al. (2020) found that gender and sexual minorities were rarely included in the global response to COVID-19. Statements and reports by international organisations (IOs) like the United Nations, World Bank and UNICEF on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality have all failed to include LGBTQ+ (Su et al. 2020). Thus, in the case of queer forced migration during COVID-19, despite LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees generally having access to organizations and policies that purport to help vulnerable groups, they were rarely about to mobilize that into meaningful or actual support.

3 | Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used in the study, detailing the site section, the research design, data collection methods employed to address the research questions.

3.1 | Site Selection

There are three main cities in northern Brazil in which our research took place—Pacaraima, Boa Vista and Manaus. These cities were chosen because humanitarian shelters run or supported by *Operation Acolhida* were primarily located there in the northern states of Roraima and Amazonas. Roraima, which directly borders Venezuela, serves as the primary entry point for Venezuelan migrants into Brazil. Pacaraima, a small border town in Roraima, has had its population triple in recent years. *Operation Acolhida* manages an emergency shelter and intake centre in Pacaraima. From there, most Venezuelans travel to Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima. Boa Vista serves as the main hub for *Operation Acolhida*'s activities. However, Roraima remains one of the Brazil's poorest regions, with limited employment opportunities, prompting many Venezuelans to migrate south to Manaus, the region's economic hub (IBGE 2023). Manaus hosts shelters and programs supported by *Operation Acolhida* and other humanitarian organizations.

In Pacaraima, tensions between local Brazilians and Venezuelans crossing the border have grown over time, with protests, ransacking, and even the lighting on fire of tents (Andreoni 2018). Moreover, Venezuelans face significant xenophobia and discrimination in Brazil (Ferreira da Silva and Sant'Ana Bento 2021). In December 2019, after considerable pressure from civil society regarding the delays in the asylum application processes, Brazil recognized thousands of Venezuelan asylum seekers as refugees on a prima facie basis, streamlining the process due to the dire circumstances in Venezuela (UNHCR 2019). Yet, this process was disrupted in March 2020 when the Brazil/Venezuela border closed under the justification of COVID-19 (Reuters 2020) despite several other Brazilian borders remaining open, including the main entry points through São Paulo's and Rio's international airports (UOL 2020).

Despite the Bolsonaro government's justification for closing the border to contain COVID-19, the federal government was slow to respond to the virus's impact inside Brazil. As the spread of the virus intensified in the North, in April 2020, Manaus quickly became the epicentre of the virus in Brazil (Phillips 2021). Despite the pandemic doubling the Venezuelan migrant population, with over 477,500 Venezuelans crossing into Brazil by August 2023 (R4V 2023), the Brazilian government's border shelter system in the north did not adequately address the needs of marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ (Cowper-Smith et al. 2022).

3.2 | Research Design and Data Collection Methods

This research paper is based on triangulating 56 surveys and 28 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Manaus, 10 KIIs with politicians, NGOs and UN staff in Brazil and participant observations in eight refugee shelters in Manaus, Boa Vista and Pacaraima. We conducted 56 surveys with Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants living in Manaus between April and July 2021 (see Table 1). Our research team consisted of one Brazilian research assistant, one Brazilian post-doctoral research fellow and two Canadian scholars (one of which is also a permanent resident of Brazil). Research ethics was obtained through the first author's institution in Canada. Participants were provided with a small voucher that covered their transportation costs. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and Portuguese. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded this project in partnership with Casa Miga. The PI has worked with Casa Miga and their staff on several other projects spanning the past 5 years. As a result, the research team has a strong connection with their staff and volunteer network, which are well-established and respected by humanitarian actors and the LGBTQI+ community in northern Brazil. Casa Miga served as an entry point to engage with the larger LGBTQI+ community in Manaus.

In 2018, a local charity in Manaus, Brazil, 'Manifesta LGBT', established 'Casa Miga', a non-profit shelter providing safety and refuge for LGBTQ+ migrants, refugees, and locals suffering violence and marginalization. At the time of its establishment, Casa Miga represented one of the few shelters for LGBTQ+ refugees in Latin America. Private donations and resources from the UNHCR supported the shelter. Casa Miga has a policy that offers shelter and support for a maximum of 3 months, after which refugees and other residents must find separate housing.

TABLE 1 | Breakdown of methods, respondents and locations.

	Number	Respondents	Locations	Time
Surveys	56	LGBTQ+ Venezuelan refugees and migrants	Manaus	April–July 2021
Semi-structured interviews	28	LGBTQ+ Venezuelan refugees and migrants	Manaus	September–October 2021
Key informant interviews	10	Politicians, NGOs and UN staff	Across Brazil but mainly Brasilia, Sao Paulo, Manaus, Boa Vista and Pacaraima	November 2019 to February 2022
Participant observations to understand humanitarian shelter vs. Casa Miga dynamics	8 humanitarian shelters	Venezuelan refugees and migrants	Manaus (Casa Miga), Boa Vista and Pacaraima (humanitarian shelters)	November 2019, February 2022, January 2023

However, this policy stopped during COVID-19 as border closures meant fewer refugees. In addition, residents did not feel safe leaving the shelter during the pandemic. At the time of the study, 4 respondents lived in Casa Miga and 52 were renting in Manaus. Due to COVID-19, Casa Migas had to limit their intake of residents for financial and health and safety reasons. Of the respondents not living there, three had previously lived in Casa Miga and all had engaged with Casa Miga through their programs, mainly around health. Manaus was greatly affected by COVID-19 and was the birthplace of the Brazil Variant with one of the highest COVID-19 mortality rates (Dantas and Pacheco 2020).

The survey participants were recruited through snowball sampling with the assistance of Casa Miga. The participants comprised 36 people who identified as cis-men, 7 who identified as cis-women, 10 trans women, 2 trans men, and 1 travesti. Travesti is a Latin American term used for individuals who strive to embody a feminine appearance and sensation while being ambivalent about retaining some male characteristics. They do not seek to become women but aim to nurture a constantly evolving femininity (Vartabedian 2018). Regarding sexual orientation, 6 identified as lesbian, 31 as gay, 13 as bisexual and 6 as straight. To ensure participants' safety and comfort, the research process was designed with a great deal of input from the Casa Miga manager. The inclusion of the Casa Miga manager is a unique methodological contribution because humanitarian actors rarely participate so centrally in research projects. This was a very deliberate decision by all parties involved because we all realised how sensitive of a subject matter our topic was and that there was a great risk that if it was not handled with care that we could risk causing harm to respondents. An outsider researcher, even if they are Brazilian or even Venezuelan, would not have the specific cultural, social and political understanding required to navigate the sensitive terrains of LGBTQ+ Venezuelan migrants experiences in Brazil during the pandemic.

The research was conducted with sensitivity and discretion. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and it was clearly explained that participants could withdraw at any time if they were uncomfortable. The surveys were conducted over the phone by the manager of Casa Miga, a Brazilian national fluent in Portuguese and Spanish and lasted between 30 min and 1 h. The surveys were conducted by phone because the research team did not deem it necessary for participants to risk contracting COVID-19 by travelling to conduct the survey in person. Given the survey was short with mostly closed-ended questions, we did not think that it made a difference that it was done by phone as opposed to in-person.

From the 56 surveys, we selected 28 participants for semi-structured interviews to gain more in-depth knowledge about their experiences. The 28 interviewees were selected to ensure a diversity of views and experiences were captured. The interviews were conducted in-person at Casa Miga in Spanish, recorded, translated, and transcribed verbatim using software and then reviewed by hand. Casa Miga had provided us a safe and comfortable space to conduct these in-person interviews. It was also a location that the participants all knew well and felt safe in. An intersectional lens was used to analyse the data, considering gender, sexuality and migrant identities. Venezuelan participants received the equivalent payment of one workday to participate in the study.

We supplemented our surveys and semi-structured interviews with 10 KIIs with politicians, NGOs and UN staff in Brazil from November 2019 to February 2022. These interviews were a mix of in-person and virtual. In-person interviews with NGO staff took place in Manaus in November 2019 and in humanitarian shelters in Boa Vista and Pacaraima during fieldwork in February 2022 and January 2023. Other KIIs took place virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions.

3.3 | Contribution of Participant Observation

We also conducted participant observation in various humanitarian shelters and informal settlements in Manaus, Boa Vista and Pacaraima. This was done in addition to the surveys and interviews in Manaus because most respondents had spent time in those shelters and had referred to them during our study. As such, it felt imperative to visit those sites ourselves to understand the unique context in which they were experiencing and describing to us in their surveys and interviews. The participant observation

in the humanitarian shelters greatly enriched our understanding of the situation in which we were studying.

Specifically, *Operation Acolhida* granted us access to six shelters in Boa Vista and one in Pacaraima. A Brazilian government representative and members from various humanitarian organizations supervised our visits. The shelters mainly consist of metal emergency dwellings, with a few common areas for larger gatherings, some facilities for children, and places to eat. The shelters range in size from 100 to 700 people. Our research team briefly chatted with LGBTQ+ Venezuelan migrants and refugees in each location and observed various activities, including volleyball games, lunch, documentation assistance, skill development workshops, volunteer training and intake procedures. Participant observation added depth and understanding to our surveys and qualitative interviews, allowing us to witness social interactions between LGBTQ+ individuals, humanitarian staff and the wider Venezuelan community.

4 | Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings on how COVID-19 affected Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees' and migrants' reliance on bonding, linking and bridging ties. The LGBTQ+ Venezuelan community in northern Brazil faced challenges due to border closures, curfews, and lockdowns, making them more economically precarious. As such, our research focused on respondents' access to financial assistance before and during COVID-19 through their social ties, especially given the Brazilian government's COVID-19 funding program.

We also analysed the institutions, groups, and actors that respondents relied on for protection from COVID-19, including family and close friends (bonding ties), host community members (bridging ties) and support organizations and government (linking ties).

Our findings reveal shifts in which groups and actor's respondents reported they could rely on for financial assistance before and during COVID-19. The results highlight shifts in these support systems brought about by pandemic-related challenges, including job loss, health concerns and economic instability. Particular attention is given to how these changes affected the strength and structure of participants' networks and their ability to access support amidst increased needs or diminished resources during this period. The focus on social capital during COVID-19 is important because bonding social capital have traditionally been helpful in these situations, but such conventional framing does not apply so neatly to LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants.

4.1 | COVID-19 Has Negatively Impacted Venezuelan LGBTQ+ Refugees' and Migrants' Reliance on Bonding Social Capital

While bonding social capital has been viewed as one of the most important resources during crisis, disaster and displacement (Aldrich 2012; Elliott et al. 2010), we also need to recognize that social capital is very unevenly distributed depending on one's economic, human and cultural capital. In the case of Venezuelan

LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants in northern Brazil who may already have strained relationships with family and friends due to cultural and religious disapproval of their identities, bonding social capital was already a limited source of support. This is evident at the start of the migrants' journeys because most of our respondents (52.7%) came to Brazil alone, meaning most respondents did not even have the support of family and friends on their journey, let alone once they arrived at their host communities. This is well documented in the literature, which notes that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers often are alone in their migration because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Hopkinson et al. 2017; Andrade 2019; Bhagat 2020).

Another difference is that bonding social capital makes up most of someone's social capital network, especially regarding who can provide financial assistance (Su 2022). However, for our respondents, bonding ties comprised the lowest of the three types of social capital for reliance on pre-pandemic financial support (Table 2). At only 21%, bonding ties like family and friends came third, after bridging ties like social networks in Brazil (23%) and linking ties (52%). Table 2 shows a breakdown of the different types of social capital ties (linking, bonding, bridging), the different groups/actors under those categories (government, NGOs, relatives) and how much respondents could rely on those groups before and during COVID-19 for financial assistance.
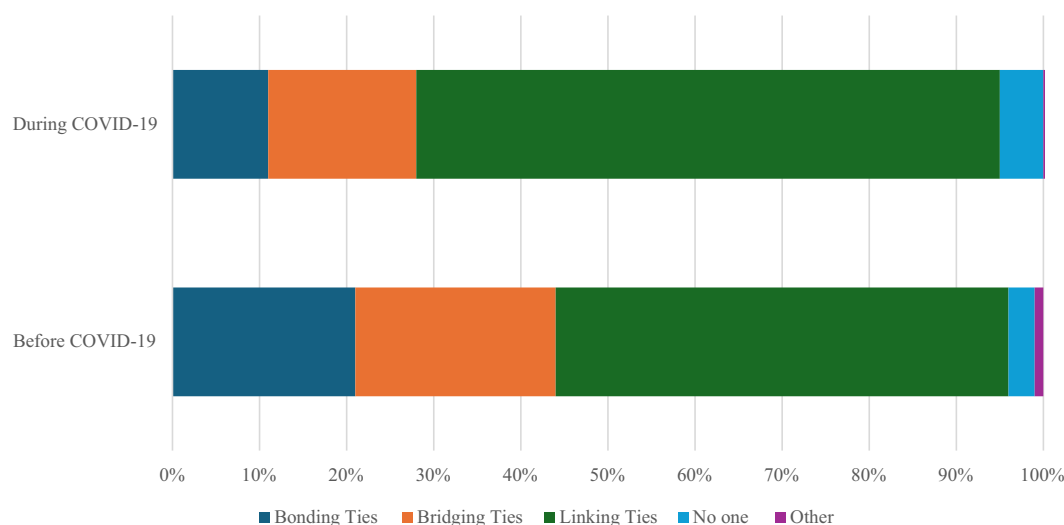
In a crisis, like COVID-19, the literature would predict that reliance on bonding and bridging social capital would increase, but that did not happen for our respondents. Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants in northern Brazil depended on various actors for financial assistance. Before COVID-19, our respondents relied strongly on bonding ties (21%), bridging ties (23%) and linking ties (52%) for financial assistance, but during COVID-19, the reliance on bonding (10%) ties decreased greatly by half, bridging (17%) ties decreased slightly and the reliance on linking (67%) ties increased by 15% (see Figure 1). Specifically, regarding bonding social capital, before COVID-19, 10% of respondents said they could rely on 'my family in Venezuela', but this number dropped to only 4% during COVID-19. The same trend occurred with 'my family and social network in other countries', which dropped from 11% pre-pandemic to 4% during COVID-19. For the category of 'my social network in Brazil', a similar, albeit less dramatic, trend was observed as the percentage of respondents who said they could rely on them for financial assistance dropped only 6%—from 23% pre-pandemic to 17% during COVID-19. Due to the financial hardship respondents suffered during the pandemic, their reliance on UNHCR, IOs, and local NGOs increased by 3%–4% during COVID-19 compared to pre-pandemic.

Surprisingly, there was only a 2% increase in respondents who stated they had no one to rely on for financial assistance during COVID-19, demonstrating the relevance of social capital during emergency periods.

Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees' and migrants' ability to rely on their bonding ties back home for support is complicated because many LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants have not revealed their LGBTQ+ identity to their family members or those who have now had estranged relationships with their family. For instance,

TABLE 2 | Groups and actors that respondents could rely on for financial assistance.

Types of social capital ties	Different groups/actors	Before COVID-19 (n = 121 responses)	Total percentage of each type of social capital ties	During COVID-19 (n = 136 responses)	Total percentage of each type of social capital ties
Linking	The government	13 (11%)	52% Linking social capital	31 (23%)	67% Linking social capital
Linking	UNHCR	11 (9%)		18 (13%)	
Linking	International NGOs	8 (7%)		14 (10%)	
Linking	Local NGOs	6 (5%)		11 (8%)	
Linking	Money lenders	7 (6%)		3 (2%)	
Linking	Religious groups	17 (14%)		15 (11%)	
Bonding	My family in Venezuela	12 (10%)	21% Bonding social capital	6 (5%)	11% Bonding social capital
Bonding	My family and social network in other countries	13 (11%)		8 (6%)	
Bridging	My social network in Brazil	28 (23%)	23% Bridging social capital	23 (17%)	17% Bridging social capital
—	No one	4 (3%)		7 (5%)	
—	Other	2 (1%)			

FIGURE 1 | Groups and actors that respondents could rely on for financial assistance before and during COVID-19.

Kim*, a middle-aged trans woman sex worker who is not out with their family, found it very challenging to navigate the family pressure to send remittances when they could not get any work in Manaus during the pandemic besides sex work. Kim shares,

> The pandemic has been really hard on me. I cried because my mother in Venezuela was always telling me, 'Son, I need to buy this and I need money to pay for that' and I say 'Mommy, how can I do it, I have no job. I don't have anything right now'. But I cannot tell them why I have nothing and how hard it is for a transwoman to get a job in Brazil during the pandemic.

The lack of reliance on bonding social capital by respondents may indicate that respondents did not feel their family networks provided them with information, support and resources that would help protect them from COVID-19. Specifically, some felt that since their family was far from them, they would not physically help them. Besides the socioeconomic conditions in Venezuela, along with the devaluation of the currency and the lack of employment opportunities, as mentioned by Kim*, undoubtedly hindered people from seeking financial or emotional support from their families in Venezuela during the pandemic. As respondents explained, many felt sad to be away from their families and missed home, making 54% of interviewees consider returning to Venezuela during the pandemic. Those who wanted to return home listed depression, loneliness and hardship as their primary

motivators for return. Julia*, a middle-aged lesbian respondent, shared, 'Many people wanted to return to their family, and it is normal because being away from their family is not easy, we all have that, we all cry, we all want to return to Venezuela sometime'. Those who did not consider returning felt the situation there was worse than in northern Brazil regarding the pandemic and their livelihoods. Kelly*, a young trans woman, shared that she did not consider going back because:

> Things in Venezuela are very hard since there is no work for anyone. Here in Brazil, it is very difficult to find work for LGBT people, but in Venezuela, there are no jobs for anyone. I have not met any LGBT people there that have work, and it is very difficult because there is no job opportunity in general.

Some stated they wanted emotional support from their family back home during the pandemic but could not get it because their family situation in Venezuela was often much worse, so they did not feel comfortable or appropriate complaining or asking for sympathy. This exemplifies the difference between having access to a resource and being able to mobilize it. While our respondents had access to their family through electronic communication and wanted to get support from their family, many were not able to mobilize that access into actual emotional, mental or physical support. This was due to a variety of reasons ranging from not being open to their family about their gender identity like Kelly*, not being able to physically return home, or feeling unable to ask for emotional support because their family members' situations in Venezuela were often much worse.

4.2 | COVID-19 Has Significantly Increased Venezuelan LGBTQ+ Refugees' and Migrants' Reliance on Linking Social Capital

A surprising result of our findings was that during COVID-19, there were increases in reliance on linking social capital such as the government, IOs and local NGOs for financial assistance. Respondents also shared that compared to bonding and bridging ties, linking ties were the ones that they felt they could rely on most to protect them from COVID-19. For a group that was made vulnerable in their home country of Venezuela due to state policies and oppression, seeing this increase and feeling of reliability for protection by state actors in Brazil is counter intuitive. We explore these findings in the section below.

Before COVID-19, only 11% of respondents reported they could rely on the government for financial assistance, but that number more than doubled, going to 23% during the pandemic (Table 2). This is due to Brazil's Emergency Cash Transfer program, *Auxílio Emergencial*, established in April 2020, that consisted of a monthly transfer of BRL 600 (Barberis 2021). Most (68%) respondents had access to the fund, and among those, everyone had access to it for less than 9 months. These findings indicate a significant reliance on the state for financial support during COVID-19. Lukas*, a young gay respondent, shared, 'Well, my monthly income right now is not good. So, I'm really being helped by the emergency aid, which is not much but useful'. The funds

were similarly helpful to Manuel*, another young gay respondent, and their family, 'I was able to get the funds twice, and it helped me a lot. It helped me pay for some things as well as send money to Venezuela'.

Despite this, it is important to note that the fund was not a panacea as most respondents could not afford basic goods despite receiving emergency funds. Before the pandemic, most respondents (62%) surveyed indicated having enough money to buy essential items, like food, daily. During the pandemic, only 18% of respondents said they had enough money to buy essential items. Meanwhile, 62% said they did not have enough money, and 22% said they sometimes had enough.

Yet, many respondents had positive things to say about linking social capital and the impact those ties had on protecting them from COVID-19. Romeo*, a middle-aged gay respondent, shared that he trusted the health services to protect him from COVID-19 because 'they are there to care for me, and they were the ones that stood up against the pandemic to protect us'. Similarly, Nikki*, a young trans woman, shared that she trusts the government because 'despite the pandemic, the government kept us warm, they gave us help, and they got us shelter'.

Some respondents said their positive experiences connecting with others in the community and receiving health care services contributed to feelings of reciprocity and goodwill for those same communities. Enrique*, a young gay respondent, explained,

> The truth is that living in Brazil has been good compared to Venezuela, the support to the community was very good, but it can evolve. I was treated well, and it can evolve more in terms of health. I was very well treated by LGBT organizations, and I want to help the LGBT community in the future.

Another young gay respondent, Matteo*, shared that he had positive, empowering experiences with international and local organizations, and thinks LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants have much to offer Brazil. He notes, 'Institutions can help LGBT populations to develop skills to help grow and strengthen the economy. We can join the military and do other jobs. We just want opportunities to grow together with Brazilians'. However, reliance on the government to protect refugees and migrants from COVID-19 differs from reliance on politicians, who were put as a separate option in the survey. Only two respondents selected politicians as actors that could be relied on for protection from COVID-19. In addition, only one respondent selected they could rely on 'no one' to protect themselves from COVID-19, suggesting that most respondents have sufficient social capital within their community to feel protected from COVID-19.

When it came to the institutions, groups and actors that respondents felt they could rely on for protection from COVID-19 (see Table 3), most respondents (68%) chose institutions such as public health, refugee centres, UNHCR and IOs to protect them. These institutions and the people respondents know at these institutions constitute linking ties. For example, respondents relied on the volunteers at Casa Miga or UNHCR staff to inform on vaccines, pandemic restrictions, and where to seek help if they

TABLE 3 | Institutions, groups and actors that respondents could rely on for protection from COVID-19.

Types of social capital ties	Different institutions/groups/actors	Number of responses ($n = 336$ responses)	Total percentage for each type of social capital ties
Linking	Public health	41 (12%)	68% Linking social capital
Linking	Police	0	
Linking	Refugee centres	40 (12%)	
Linking	Casa Miga	35 (10%)	
Linking	UNHCR	41 (12%)	
Linking	International NGOs	40 (12%)	
Linking	Local NGOs	31 (9%)	
Linking	Politicians	2 (1%)	
Bonding	Friends	36 (11%)	24% Bonding social capital
Bonding	Family	42 (13%)	
Bridging	Local people	22 (7%)	7% Bridging social capital
None	Nobody	1 (0%)	1% Other
Other	Other	5 (1%)	

contracted COVID-19. Thus, in this case, linking social capital is both the institutions and the people within these institutions that provide the information and assistance to Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants. Respondents also indicated that they could rely on their bonding ties, such as family and friends, with 24% responding positively to these options. Moreover, 7% of respondents reported they could rely on bridging ties such as local people. However, it is clear that respondents had access to more bonding and bridging ties, they just did not feel they could rely on them for actual protection from COVID-19. This is evidence of the disparity between their access to social capital and their ability to mobilize that access into protect.

Moreover, these numbers for bonding and bridging ties would be considered low in the situation of a crisis where the literature has historically said most assistance come from immediate family and friends (Aldrich 2012; Elliott et al. 2010). And reliance on linking ties is low because while most people may know or have access to someone in a position of power like a politician, their ability to mobilize that access into material resources is low, especially in Global South countries where resources often move through clientelism (González-Ocantos and Oliveros 2019). Instead, what we see is a significant increase in the access and mobilization of linking ties into funds and other forms of support because there were specific programs that targeted poor and vulnerable groups during the pandemic such as Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants.

One respondent did not return to Venezuela during the pandemic because they felt very supported by the institutions and NGOs in Brazil. Pricilla* shared, 'Well, at the start of the pandemic, I wanted to return to Venezuela because things got a bit difficult because we had no income, worry, and stuff, but as I mentioned in the survey, many institutions help LGBT people thank you, Lord, I received a lot of aid from associations'.

Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees' and migrants' ability to mobilize resources and protection from linking social capital during COVID-19 is an important contribution to migration studies and humanitarian scholarship. Our knowledge has conventionally been that sexual and gender minority refugees often experience an increase in stigmatization and discrimination after crises and disasters (Gorman-Murray et al. 2014; Balgos et al. 2012; Gaillard 2011) and that issues specific to LGBTQ+ minorities such as stigmatization, abuse and lack of safe spaces culminate in increased marginalizations during crises (Camminga 2021; Larkin 2019), the nexus of these factors have often left sexual and gender minority without much support from linking ties in the form of government programs or official aid. As such, the increased use and reliance on linking ties by Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants during COVID-19 in Brazil is a new and interesting finding.

However, when examined at the level of NGOs who often play a vital role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees in connecting with host communities and rebuilding social capital in displacement situations (Almohamed and Vyas 2019), we see similar trends. Casa Miga, one of the only LGBT shelters in Latin America, was immensely helpful to our respondents. They also provided a unique experience for asylum seekers in both connecting to host communities, but also by providing a safe space from heightened stigmatization and discrimination for LGBTQI+ individuals during crises.

4.3 | COVID-19 Had a Positive Impact on Venezuelan LGBTQ+ Refugees' and Migrants' Reliance on Bridging Social Capital

Another important finding demonstrates how the pandemic strengthened respondents' connections to other social groups
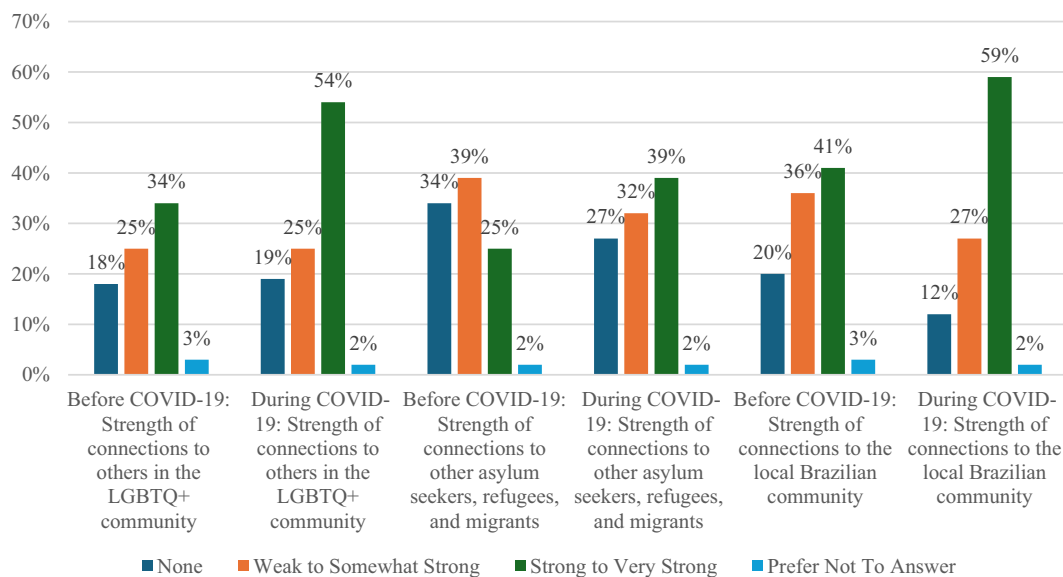
FIGURE 2 | Strength of connections to (1) others in the LGBTQ+ community, (2) other refugees and migrants and (3) the local Brazilian community before and during COVID-19.

(bridging social capital), specifically (1) the LGBTQ+ community in Manaus, (2) other refugees and migrants and (3) the local Brazilian community.

When respondents were asked to rate the strength of their connections or relationships with others in the LGBTQ+ community before and during COVID-19, we noticed significant changes (see Figure 2). Before the pandemic, 34% of respondents reported having strong to very strong connections to others in the LGBTQ+ community, and during COVID-19, this number grew significantly by 20%–54%. Respondents shared that during the pandemic, different forms of mutual aid within the LGBTQ+ community were important for their survival. They sought out other LGBTQ+ people to rent housing together as it was too challenging to do individually due to the stigma they faced. Mia*, a young trans woman, explained, 'When I was trying to find a place by myself as a Venezuelan, I was never successful but when I looked for places with Brazilian LGBT friends during the pandemic, I was successful. I now live with three LGBT Brazilian friends and I feel very supported'. Regarding livelihood, Nikki*, a trans woman respondent, explained, 'Where I currently live is where I met my good friends, who are also queer, Fernanda and Daniel. We supported each other and put up a bench to sell snacks. Through that, little by little, we were helping each other make enough to have at least the daily food and rent'.

Similarly, the pandemic strengthened respondents' connections to other refugees and migrants. Before COVID-19, 34% of respondents stated they had no connection to other refugees and migrants in Manaus, 39% reported weak to somewhat strong connections, and only 25% said their connections were strong or very strong. These weak bonds to other refugees and migrants are unsurprising to NGO staffers who shared stories of friction and sometimes violence between the Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and the Venezuelan non-LGBTQ+ community. NGO staffers shared that Venezuelan mothers commonly criticized the presence of LGBTQ+ refugees in the humanitarian shelters because

they 'exhibit sinful behaviour and are a bad influence on their children'.

Similarly, there was a strong sentiment by these groups that LGBTQ+ refugees should move out of the shelters into different ones. These negative experiences in the shelters illustrate why respondents may have ranked their relations with other refugees and migrants so low before COVID-19. The story changed for our respondents during the pandemic because they all left the humanitarian shelters and were instead living at Casa Miga (7%) or renting (93%). During the pandemic, the percentage of respondents reporting strong to very strong connections increased to 39%, a 14% increase from pre-pandemic. When asked about this strengthening bond with other refugees and migrants during COVID-19, the manager of Casa Miga explained,

> I saw very frequently the arrival of new migrants over the years from Venezuela, Cuba, and Afghanistan, and sometimes they do not get along. But during the pandemic, I saw more incidences of strangers form bonds and cheer others' success. I saw them give tips and helping each other to do better. For example, when the pandemic arrived, everyone worked together to clean everything with bleach, and to clean the house, to protect everyone from the virus.

Finally, relationships between respondents and the local Brazilian community also strengthened during the pandemic (see Figure 2). Before COVID-19, 20% of respondents reported no connection to the local Brazilian community, 36% stated they had weak to somewhat strong connections and 41% said they had strong to very strong connections. During the pandemic, those who reported having strong to very strong connections to the local Brazilian community grew by 18% to make up the majority of respondents (59%). Michele*, a young trans woman, when asked to reflect on her connections to her local community,

shared, 'I feel so supported by my Brazilian friends as well as my Venezuelan friends during the pandemic'.

Bridging ties, seen generally as weak ties, is argued to be a good source of extra-community support in crises, as reaching out to friends, colleagues, and acquaintances outside of the affected community is seen as an effective way to access and mobilize resources (Elliott et al. 2010; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). In addition, strong bridging social capital, seen as positive interactions with locals and participating in community associations and activities, was found to be an important aspect of making refugees and migrants feel accepted by the host community (Almohamed and Vyas 2019). So, increasing their reliance on bridging social capital with local groups and communities in Manaus was helpful for respondents to feel a sense of belonging and to access resources during COVID-19. This may represent a situation where respondents had a similar ability to access and mobilize resources through their social ties.

The large increase in the percentage of respondents reporting very strong connections is particularly significant because while it is noted that tension typically rise between refugees and migrants and locals in host communities (Dimitriadis and Ambrosini 2024), the pandemic seemed to bring the two communities closer together. Many studies of disasters and displacements have found that crises have transformative potential as they can help communities overcome social cleavages in the immediate aftermath of disasters (Lukes 2006). Oliver-Smith's (1979, 1994) research has found that disasters can present unique opportunities for change that encourage transformations in the social fabric of society as people come together in ritualistic ways to search, rescue, bury the dead and grieve.

With their family members in Venezuela being struck by the compounding crises of poverty, economic and political collapse and healthcare failure during COVID-19, respondents were forced to reduce their reliance on direct support from family members who were physically distant. Consequently, they had to look for support locally and among populations they already share connections or similarities with. This was especially strong between respondents, migrants and refugees and other LGBTQ+ people, as many recognized they faced unique challenges during the pandemic, so banding together to share resources regarding housing and livelihood was a good survival strategy. As Oliver-Smith (1994) argues, the crisis allowed people to forget social differences and come together to face the immediate danger. We saw examples of this through respondents coming together with local Brazilians to rent like Mia* because otherwise they would be homeless. Or respondents coming together to take turns selling snacks like Nikki* because they would not be able to sell as much if they worked alone. These social connections were made to strengthen their situation and survive amid a global pandemic. It was to increase their ability to mobilize their access to social capital into material resources and support during a crisis.

5 | Conclusion

The pandemic has had a multifaceted effect on the reliance of Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants in Brazil on different forms of social capital. Bonding social capital, usually a signifi-

cant support source, was diminished due to strained relationships while bridging social capital through local networks became more crucial. This research also demonstrates the importance of local NGOs, such as Casa Miga, in reaching key populations, considering that without the support and guidance of IOs, church groups and other local organizations, many immigrants and LGBTQ+ individuals might not have been able to access Brazil's government emergency fund and relevant information for protection against COVID-19. Linking social capital reliance increased mostly due to the Brazilian government's COVID-19 fund.

These findings on the social capital of LGBTQ+ Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Brazil during COVID-19 are significant, as they challenge the prevailing understanding of the role of social capital during crises (Aldrich 2012; Elliott et al. 2010; Casagrande et al. 2015). It is crucial to acknowledge that outliers exist and require context-specific comprehension and that intersectionalities must be considered in the studies analysis. Due to their marginalized social positions as gender and/or sexual minorities, Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants in Brazil lack strong social networks with family and close friends, commonly available to non-LGBTQ+ population. As such, conventional frameworks and thinking on the social capital of LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants are not as application to this group.

This case study provides empirical evidence countering the prevailing approach in the humanitarian landscape, emphasizing self-reliant refugees. While social capital is often promoted as the 'capital of the poor' (Gertler et al. 2006), it cannot be assumed that all refugees can rely on their social capital ties to access assistance and resources. This study underscores the complex social capital dynamics among Venezuelan LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants during COVID-19, offering insights into the challenges marginalized groups face in crises and emphasizing the importance of diverse social networks for resilience and support.

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