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# Masks are for sissies: the story of LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Brazil during COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

Queer migration and counter-movement literature are established subsets of social science scholarship that, together, could illuminate debates around queer rights activism in a migration context. Yet, the intersection of these two sets of scholarship is largely underexplored. Recognizing this gap, a valuable case study can be found in Brazil, which is home to both the only LGBTQI+ refugee centre in Latin America, Casa Miga, and a growing anti-gay and anti-gender counter-movement. Thus, to better understand the conceptual novelty of the intersection of queer migration and counter-movement literature, we draw on 26 interviews with Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers, politicians, NGOs, and UN staff in Brazil conducted before and during the pandemic. Our central argument is that Casa Miga, an LGBTQI+ refugee centre, is an essential bulwark against the coordinated counter-movements that share the goal of defeating LGBTQI+ and feminist agendas in Brazil. We conclude that lacking local avenues for action, international appeals during COVID-19 for gender and LGBTQI+ sensitive responses become critical. Indeed, the gendered impacts of COVID-19 – regarding women – are becoming well-known due to vocal feminist groups worldwide. Yet, these calls for action have largely missed analysing how COVID-19 impacts LGBTQI+ populations, even in gender-sensitive reporting.

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Gender; brazil; asylum seekers; lgbtqi+; covid-19

## Introduction

Brazil has a rich history of progressive social movements that have made substantial gains in policy and law. Since the 1990s, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements have worked with political parties to spearhead the adoption of international commitments regarding rights for women and LGBTQI+ people (Reis Brandão & Cabral, 2019). Indeed, as Rosenberg (n.d.) writes, '... Brazil is a leading state in the international, domestic, and regional battle against LGBT discrimination through the Brazilian government and several active, civil society organizations, such as Sexual Policy Watch and Associação Brasileira de Gays Lésbicas, Bissexuais Transvestis e Transsexuais' (p.17). Brazil has legalized same-sex marriage and implemented legislation that protects same-sex couples and their rights. Brazil is also home to a lively LGBTQI+ community (U of T Faculty of Law, 2015). At the same time, Brazil is well-known as a migrant-receiving country:

Under the UN Refugee Act and the 1997 Brazilian Refugee Act, the government has formally resettled several thousand refugee families (mostly from West Africa, Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia). In 2013, it became the first country in the Americas to issue humanitarian visas for Syrian refugees; these special visas allowed Syrians expedited entry to Brazil, where they could formally request asylum. In response to the 2010 earthquake, Brazil

opened its borders to Haitians on humanitarian grounds, rather than acting according to refugee law (Kingston, 2016, p. 484).

In 2019, Brazil also recognized ‘thousands of Venezuelan asylum seekers as refugees on a prima facie basis’ (UNHCR, 2019). Brazil’s image as a progressive society has drawn migrants from marginalized communities to the country (UNHCR, 2020). Indeed, Canada deems Brazil a ‘safe country’ (or Designated Country of Origin) for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers (U of T Faculty of Law, 2015).

Paradoxically, although Brazil has led Latin America to advance women and LGBTQI+ communities’ rights and those of refugees, the country is becoming a dangerous place for these same groups. Rising anti-gender, anti-gay, and nationalist rhetoric, culminating in the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro, an ultra-conservative president, makes Brazil a hostile country for these communities. Bolsonaro is widely known to be homophobic, and he has been quoted saying, ‘Yes, I’m homophobic – and very proud of it’ (Philips, 2018). And he is not a one-person show. An anti-gay, anti-gender counter-movement that supported his party’s campaign in 2018 continues to fan his inflammatory speech (Snyder & Wolff, 2019). Right-wing politicians, church leaders, and media moguls partially generated the misogynist and anti-gay atmosphere that empowered this ultra-conservative president’s election and legitimacy (Snyder & Wolff, 2019).

Compounding this reality, political tensions and social inequalities have been exacerbated by the Brazilian government’s dangerous and lacklustre response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Bolsonaro has publicly dismissed the pandemic as a ‘little cold’ and has used homophobic slurs to describe people’s efforts in preventing its spread (McCoy & Traiano, 2020; Phillips, 2020, July 8). For instance, in early July 2020, a newspaper called the *Folha de São Paulo*, claimed that Bolsonaro called masks, used to protect against the COVID-19 virus, ‘*coisa de viado*’ translated to ‘for fairies’ or ‘for sissies’ (Bergamo, 2020, July 7) where ‘*viado*’ is a pejorative term primarily used to refer to gay men and boys. Several months later, Bolsonaro continued to downplay the severity of the pandemic by calling on Brazilians to stop being a ‘country of sissies’ (Farzan & Berger, 2020, November 11). Today, in Brazil, the local channels for women and LGBTQI+ rights activism have been severely curtailed and blocked by anti-gender, anti-gay counter-movements, which embolden the current administration.

These realities point to the promising nexus of queer migration and counter-movement literature. Yet, there is a shortage in scholarship that sees the theories, frameworks, and concepts of queer migration and social movements as overlapping. To better understand the relationship between queer migration and counter-movements, we conducted a case study of Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper draws on data from 26 semi-structured interviews held in Brazil with 16 Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers, and 10 interviews with politicians, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and United Nations (UN) staff, and Brazil’s Coordinator-General for the National Committee of Refugees (CONARE). Our central argument is that Casa Miga, a centre that supports LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees, is an essential bulwark against the coordinated counter-movements that share the goal of defeating LGBTQI+ and feminist agendas (Corredor, 2019). LGBTQI+ migrants must navigate violence in their everyday lives. Casa Miga is a beacon of respite in these hostile conditions.

Additionally, in Brazil, LGBTQI+ asylum seekers are heavily affected yet largely ignored during the pandemic due to the government’s lack of attention to the needs of LGBTQI+ people, particularly asylum seekers. Ultimately, we conclude that lacking local avenues for action, international appeals during COVID-19 for gender and LGBTQI+ sensitive responses become critical. Indeed, the gendered impacts of COVID-19 – regarding women – are becoming well-known due to vocal feminist groups worldwide. Nevertheless, these international calls for action by feminist groups have largely missed analysing how COVID-19 impacts LGBTQI+ populations, even in gender-sensitive reporting (Nogueira, 2017; Shayne & Manfredi 2019; Su, Cowper-Smith & Valiquette, 2020).

## LGBTQI+ and Gender Rights in Brazil: The Nexus of Queer Migration and Social Movement Scholarship

The intersection of queer migration and social movement scholarship can illuminate the realities of LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Brazil by adding analytical complexity through the theoretical interchange of both kinds of literature. Queer migration helps us understand how LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees encounter and navigate new spaces while pointing to the idea that their experiences cannot be divorced from structures of violence (Bhagat, 2018). Counter-movement literature helps us understand the emergence and the maintenance of those very structural forces by explaining the current dynamics of social and political forces in each context.

Queer migration is revealing of how migration is not an apolitical enterprise, with neat, linear conclusions. According to Luibhéid (2008), 'the study of queer migration has participated in and enhanced scholarship about the emergence of multiple, hybrid sexual cultures, identities, identifications, practices, and politics. These are marked by power, contestation, and creative adaptation' (p.173). Queer migration is also about 'recovering, theorizing, and valorizing histories and subjects that have been largely rendered invisible, unintelligible, and unspeakable in both queer and migration studies' (p. 171). In an empirical case study of LGBTQI+ migrants in South Africa, Bhagat (2018) demonstrates how LGBTQI+ asylum seekers exemplify,

... spatial unevenness as they face additional pressures due to the entangled discriminations of race, class, and sexuality. Queer asylum seekers face structural and everyday forms of violence as they navigate both the core and periphery of the city facing violence in every aspect of public and private life despite legal provisions on a national scale (p.155).

To understand LGBTQI+ migrant experience, Bhagat (2018) analyses 'the violent processes in which state-structured violence embedded in the heteronormative urban space impedes the survival of forcibly displaced queer people' (p.155). Bhagat (2018) further asserts that,

Violence in urban space has structural and 'everyday' dimensions which constrain the lives of queer asylum seekers. The concept of access, whether it be the 'right to the city' or more imminent material considerations such as shelter and employment needs to be brought to the forefront of understanding state-structured violence and heteronormativity. Simply put, this group of 'hidden' migrants must navigate a tricky set of state-determined barriers in order to gain status and live (p.159).

For Bhagat (2018), places of migration, such as South Africa, are complicit actors in structuring the everyday violence that queer asylum seekers face by the state's hands. Bhagat (2018) demonstrates that LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Cape Town experience daily microaggressions and forms of violence that structure their existence. Moreover, their everyday struggle for belonging as they navigate violent spaces is made more difficult by their precarious access to resources. This focus on queer migration is revealing of everyday encounters with structural violence. So, although queer migration scholarship supports our understanding of LGBTQI+ migration experience, it is also necessary to better understand the broader structural forces that undergird the Brazilian context.

That context can be illuminated by counter-movement literature. Corredor (2019) argues that counter-movement theory helps to demonstrate how seemingly decentralized or isolated anti-gender activities are part of, and operate within, coordinated counter-movements that share the goal of defeating feminist and LGBTQI+ agendas. In Latin America, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements have recognized that gender is a crucial domain for the operation of social power which has contributed to successfully debunking the social construction of gender as a given or natural organizing principle of societies. Gender works as an organizing principle because, cis, straight men are privileged within the system. In contrast, gender transgression (that is, deviation from the established gender norms of femininity and masculinity) can result in severe consequences such as violence and discrimination (Lennon & Alsop, 2020). Thus, both sexist and homophobic surveillance rests on gender norms that privilege cis male social power (Kaufman & Brod, 1994; Lennon & Alsop, 2020). By separating sex and gender, feminists and LGBTQI+ activists in Latin America argued that

'women' and 'men' are socially constructed categories that inform societies' understanding of gender and sexual orientation (Rousseau, 2020). LGBTQI+ and feminist activists have thus shown that unpacking gender is vital for combating both sexism and homophobia. Both forms of violence are underpinned and propped up by patriarchal systems that encourage the policing of gender boundaries. Whether the other is a woman, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or Trans person, the persecution of the other is an attempt to assert dominance based on a straight, male order (Rousseau, 2020).

The movements by LGBTQI+ communities and feminists in Latin America show that gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights are inextricable. The two communities have historically worked together to reduce inequities and advance their rights based on this idea of the social construction of gender (Matos, 2018). As Matos (2018) states, Brazilian public policymaking has gone through 'depatriarchalizing' and 'deheteronormatizing'. Starting in the 1990s, Brazil's social movements, sought to dismantle inequitable systems based on race, gender, and sex as a way to confront forms of discrimination that are profoundly rooted in cultural and social practices that are sexist, racist and homophobic (Matos, 2018). Matos (2018) explains that this movement's second wave was championed by diverse actors such as black and rural women and those from the LGBTQI+ community. The third wave of this movement focused on institutionalizing organizations that emerged because of earlier feminist and LGBTQI+ movements. Regarding legislative changes, into the early 2000s, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements made substantial gains by continuously breaking down the socially constructed heteronormative gender binary through implementing gender mainstreaming in public policies, developing laws against femicide (IACHR, 2001), and championing the legalization of same-sex marriage and gender identity laws (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020; Friedman, 2019; Matos, 2018; Pasinato, 2016; UN Women, 2011). In the 2000s, the Brazilian version of the 'Slut Walk', called the 'Marchas das Vadias', gained traction with activists taking to the streets in defiance of gender and sexual norms (Alvarez, 2019). These actions are all part of feminist and LGBTQI+ groups working together for social changes in the country, rooted in the idea that constrictions based on gender need to be overcome for both Women's and LGBTQI+ people's liberation.

Paradoxically, violence against women and LGBTQI+ people in Brazil is increasing. It is puzzling that a state with progressive movements, and state protections, is becoming less safe for women, LGBTQI+ people, and asylum seekers. Authors studying this phenomenon see the strong push back as a mass movement by anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-gender counter-movements as a visceral reaction to the successes of feminist and LGBTQI+ movements during the Pink Tide<sup>1</sup> (Alvarez, 2019; Snyder & Wolff, 2019). Several authors have noted that feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in Latin America have been followed by counter-movements and collective actions that block and resist change (Machado, 2018; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Valiquette, 2017). Counter-movements have mobilized against the social construction of gender, harkening back to the idea that gender is biologically predetermined, and that claiming otherwise is detrimental to children's well-being (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020; Carvalho & Sivori, 2017; Corrêa, 2018; Corredor, 2019). Not unique to Latin America, there has been a marked resurgence of gender essentialism (Lennon & Alsop, 2020). As Lennon and Alsop (2020) write,

This resurgence runs alongside a sinister reinforcement taking place politically across the globe in which claims of gender essentialism – an insistence on natural or God-given differences between men and women that indicate appropriate social roles – are being harnessed to bolster right-wing populist claims and new nationalisms (p.6).

Nowhere is that clearer than in the counter-movements in Latin America. Arguing mainly for children and families' safety, counter-movements are attempting to roll back gender and sexuality rights by re-invoking the traditional gender binary that women and LGBTQI+ groups have long fought against (Rousseau, 2020). In Brazil, the counter-movement has mobilized around ideas of 'moral worth' and 'family values' (Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020). For instance, Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), a group in the counter-movement, engages in anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-feminist attacks and fosters fear around LGBTQI+ inclusion (Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020). By linking a litany of issue areas such as anti-

corruption, neoliberalism, and anti-abortion, MBL cobbles together a heteronormative vision that bridges conservative political parties and religious groups. MBL acts in defence of 'the family' by establishing roles for men and women, emphasizing heterosexual marriage and parenting, and leaving no room for sexuality and gender along a spectrum (Ibid). Another key member of the counter-movement,<sup>2</sup> large Evangelical Churches, are highly invested in social issues and in Latin America, they are some of the most outspoken political and societal groups in terms of anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-gender rhetoric (Encarnación, 2016; Marsiaj, 2008; Oro, 2003; Valiquette, 2017). These powerful political actors often endeavour to block the advancement of LGBTQI+ and women's rights (de Souza, 2014; Valiquette, 2017). Together with their congressional allies, they have become the largest voting bloc in Congress. This congressional alliance, known as Bible, Bullets, and Bison (BBB), includes (Encarnación, 2016; Valiquette, 2017) Religious conservative groups (Evangelicals and Catholics), ruralist parties, and military parties. Voting blocs typically vote within party lines, and since Evangelicals have support from these groups, along with the executive branch, gender and LGBTQI+ policy agendas face significant barriers within parliament. These groups' collaboration has made it increasingly difficult for any progressive movement to use national political channels for social change (Valiquette, 2017).

Furthermore, authors underline that gender is the central lightning rod of these counter-movements (Rousseau, 2020). Increasingly placed at the centre of political disputes, contentious issues related to gender are used by these actors to resist the advances of feminist and LGBTQI+ social movements (Brandão & Cabral, 2019; Rousseau, 2020). For instance, gender issues were at the forefront of the 2014 Brazilian presidential election. Opposition parties employed misogynist and anti-gender discourse during President Dilma Rousseff's second term in 2014 (Biroli, 2016). In 2016, the far-right and right-of-centre political parties, who controlled the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, effectively organized a 'constitutional coup' against Brazil's first female president (Rubim & Argolo, 2018). The parties cited corruption charges despite a lack of concrete evidence of wrongdoing. President Rousseff was labelled as politically subversive by conservative groups, casting doubt on her moral and ideological viewpoints, and her sexuality (Sosa, 2019). The conservative movement used sexist and sexualized images of Rousseff in their attacks on the president, while conservative media outlets labelled her as being too 'emotionally unstable' to lead the country (Sosa, 2019). Ultimately, Rousseff was impeached, despite her male predecessors surviving similar corruption accusations, pointing to the idea that anti-feminist and anti-gender attacks can be politically effective.

In 2018, Bolsonaro's law and order campaign seized this narrative, rallying against the incursion of 'threats' stemming from LGBTQI+ and feminist groups (Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020). Indeed, Goldstein (2019) states that, 'Bolsonaro attacks what he calls "gender ideology" for destroying the values of authority at school and traditional gender roles ... a conservative agenda is being pushed by the far-right groups that intend to reconstruct an idealized traditional gendered order' (pp. 255–256). Authors note that counter-movements allowed Bolsonaro to draw power from publicly denouncing two key issues. They advocated for Ideologia de Genero (Gender Ideology) and Movimento Escola Sem Partido (Schools Without Political Parties) to remove 'left-wing' ideology including gender and sexuality studies from schools, alleging that they indoctrinate children and destroy heteronormative families (Goldstein, 2019; Lima & Hypolito, 2019; Snyder & Wolff, 2019). These themes arose, emphasizing the electoral debates over abortion and violence against LGBTQI+ individuals and divided the candidates into ideological fields.

In summary, the initial political and social progress made by movements in the 1990s has been impacted by a strong counter-movement. The review of the two sets of literature shows the synergy between them and the potential to merge their insights to understand Casa Miga's case. The findings below will show how these counter-movements have created an environment – exacerbated by the pandemic – allowing for the perpetuation of violence and discrimination that women and LGBTQI+ asylum seekers must navigate. Specifically, Trans asylum seekers face an increased risk of transphobia, exploitation, and extreme violence (Kouw, 2018; Rosenberg, 2016; van der Pijl, Oude Breuil, Swetzer, Dynioti, & Goderie, 2018). Casa Miga is a bulwark against these counter-movements,



supporting LGBTQI+ “asylum seekers and refugees” who must navigate this environment of structural violence. LGBTQI+ and feminist movements are on the front lines fighting against the law-and-order version of conservatism that was promoted during the election, an ideology that is racist, patriarchal, homophobic, and heteronormative at its core.

## Materials and methods

The case of Casa Miga is valuable for unpacking the intersection of queer migration and counter-movement literature. Lacking government funds, in 2018, a local charity called Manifesta LGBT started Casa Miga, a non-profit shelter run by LGBTQI+ volunteers. It is currently supported through private donations and essential resources from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers who have faced harassment at previous shelters are often referred to Casa Miga by partner organizations, such as the UNHCR or local NGOs. Casa Miga provides protection for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers for a maximum of three months before they must find separate housing. While Casa Miga provides asylum seekers with shelter and support, with the COVID-19 pandemic, myriad challenges have surfaced that overwhelm the shelter’s capacity and the Venezuelan LGBTQI+ themselves. The refugee centre is in Manaus, a city with one of the highest COVID-19 mortality rates of Brazil’s capital cities (Dantas & Pacheco, 2020).

Given the difficulty of researching with vulnerable populations, the participants’ safety was a priority throughout the research process. To ensure that participants felt safe to express their experiences, we partnered with the staff at Casa Miga. As the first foreign researchers permitted to interview LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Casa Miga, the research process was designed with a great deal of input from Casa Miga’s Manager to ensure that participants would feel comfortable. Moreover, this research was designed with the ethics of conducting fieldwork with vulnerable populations in mind. Much attention was paid to the ethical issues including the need for sensitivity and discretion when asking about past traumas. Informed consent was carefully asked for from participants, with researchers understanding the importance of anonymity and security for the asylum seekers. The research was approved through the University of Brasilia, and the confidentiality of participants was a priority. As such, all asylum seekers and staff of Casa Miga were given pseudonyms in this research. The NGO staff, politicians, and UN staff have consented to using their names and positions. All participants in this study were recruited through the authors’ professional and personal networks. All asylum seeker participants in this study were recruited through Casa Miga with the key informants recruited by the authors’ professional and personal networks.

In total, we conducted 26 semi-structured interviews: 16 with Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and 10 with key informant service-providers and politicians. Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers were recruited, as they are by far the largest and fastest growing group of asylum seekers in Brazil. Eight interviews with asylum seekers were completed in November 2019 (pre COVID-19), and eight were conducted in May 2020 (during COVID-19). The 16 asylum seekers identified variably as gay, lesbian, and Trans, are aged between 21 and 46, and none are married. All asylum seekers had lived in Brazil for under one year (Valiquette, Cowper-Smith, & Su, 2021). The remaining ten key informant interviews were with NGO staff, politicians, UN staff, and Brazil’s Coordinator-General for CONARE (the National Committee of Refugees). All the asylum seekers speak Spanish as their first language and have a basic understanding of Portuguese, the national language of Brazil. The interviews with asylum seekers were conducted in Spanish, with the key informant interviews being conducted in Portuguese. To protect interviewees’ physical health, all of the interviews took place over Zoom or on the phone and lasted between 35 to 40 minutes (Valiquette et al., 2021). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, we conducted a review of reports and statements on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality by “central humanitarian international organisations (IOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)” to identify whether gender and sexual minorities were included in their reporting. The verbatim data was coded and ordered within a thematic matrix, which emerged both from reviewing extant literature and the

interview data itself. An intersectional lens was used in analysing the data, considering gender, sexual and migrant identities. To determine the impact of the pandemic on LGBTQI+ Venezuelans, a comparative approach was applied when analysing the interview data from before and after the pandemic.

## Findings

The following section details the themes of our analysis, which point to the everyday reality of what life is like as a Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seeker. This diverse group faces challenges that include violence and discrimination and the loss of livelihood and government aid due to the pandemic. The pandemic has also accentuated the obvious lack of preparedness and desire of the national government to address LGBTQI+ asylum seekers' needs. Casa Miga is a bulwark against the growing anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment that is growing in the country, supporting "asylum seekers and refugees" amid an environment of intense structural violence.

### *Violence and discrimination faced by asylum seekers before COVID-19*

All eight of the asylum seekers interviewed before the pandemic shared experiences of homophobic and xenophobic violence while in Brazil, ranging from homophobic slurs on the streets to public beatings and head shavings by local people to police brutality. One lesbian Venezuelan woman recalled being mugged by a group of men and then left severely injured in the Amazonian rainforest (Valiquette et al., 2021). Six interviewees referenced facing anti-LGBTQI+ discrimination and violence while searching for employment, at their place of employment, or while interacting with the police.

Of the eight interviewees, four people identified as Trans and all of them highlighted instances of violence and discrimination, explicitly linked to the persecution of Trans identities. One Trans Venezuelan woman was physically assaulted while working as a sex worker. She faced discrimination and dismissal when she reported her attack to the police because she thought the police officers did not care to investigate violence against a Trans asylum-seeking sex worker. Another Trans Venezuelan woman described how she was outed as Trans in a public square. A group of men restrained her, and proceeded to shave her head. The incident left her 'traumatized' and she now hides her Trans identity when in public settings (Valiquette et al., 2021).

### *COVID-19 exacerbates the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ asylum seekers*

Interviewees' mental health suffered significantly due to the pandemic. The interviewees noted that the fear of violence and infection intensified after all of the residents inside Casa Miga contracted the virus and one resident was hospitalized. Five asylum seekers said that narratives propagated by fake news stories on social media claiming LGBTQI+ people are COVID-19 spreaders have caused them to fear for their safety even more so than before. They stressed that their lives had become even more precarious, and they felt increased anxiety about finding work and settling in Brazil. In addition, the interviewees felt they had very little support from the Brazilian state. They stressed that the government was not doing enough to protect citizens, let alone asylum seekers. As one gay Venezuelan shared,

Those of us who live in the refugee shelters see it as temporary, we have hope that we will leave and begin to have a more normal life. COVID-19 has erased that hope. We don't know what is happening.

Moreover, four interviewees revealed that the pandemic left them feeling 'frozen' because the main refugee determination centre in Manaus halted processing. A gay Venezuelan man stated, 'It [COVID-19] has interrupted the asylum process, I have no idea what's happening'. Further, asylum seekers no longer had access to essential services like health care or their monthly allowances from the government. In April 2020, the Brazilian government launched an emergency fund (*Auxílio*



*Emergencial*) for anyone without paid labour. The fund provided 600 reais (\$110 USD) per month for three months. After three months, the government extended the emergency fund until the end of September. In October, the government created a residual fund lasting until December 2020, providing those eligible with 300 reais (\$55 USD) per month. After December 2020, the emergency fund was cancelled. Although initially accessible by asylum seekers, many faced significant challenges in accessing the money because asylum seekers were required to produce documentation and resources that many of them did not have. To produce the correct documentation, asylum seekers needed to access services that were either closed, or moved online, and many asylum-seekers have limited access to the Internet.

### ***COVID-19 leads to new threats of violence and discrimination for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers***

As seen above, LGBTQI+ asylum seekers are already at risk of violence and discrimination. However, during a pandemic, asylum seekers are at greater risk when mobility and freedom are especially limited. Since the start of the pandemic, Casa Miga continued taking in LGBTQI+ Venezuelans. However, the method for arrival has changed due to insecurity caused by the virus. Instead of being referred to Casa Miga by a partner organization, Casa Miga prioritizes those cases of people who were 'outed' and face discrimination and pressing threats to their safety. The manager of Casa Miga described how 'outing' occurs. He noted,

They [LGBTQI+ asylum seekers] are forced to be together for long periods of time, in high levels of stress with very little privacy or ability to hide their sexuality and gender identities. When these things are revealed they are often expelled during the pandemic, so the prejudice is stronger than ever before.

Since the start of the pandemic, three LGBTQI+ asylum seekers have sought shelter at Casa Miga after being expelled from another shelter, a rented home, or a space shared with friends, due to persecution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. One Trans person was rejected from their previous shelter when it was revealed that they were Trans. In another case, a woman who identifies as a lesbian was forced out of her residence when her sexuality was revealed. Casa Miga's manager shared that 'she was expelled in the middle of the night and the middle of the pandemic, arriving at Casa Miga in a complete state of shock'. A third asylum seeker was evicted after the landlord learned of his sexual orientation. All LGBTQI+ asylum seekers who accessed Casa Miga during the pandemic noted that they needed to stay in an LGBTQI+ friendly shelter for their protection.

### ***The Brazilian government's lack of preparedness and willingness to address COVID-19***

From the perspective of the interviewees, the Brazilian government was utterly unprepared for the pandemic. Since their monthly allowance from the government came to a standstill, asylum seekers were left unaware of how to support themselves when their livelihood sources (often sex work or informal work) had also been banned. For instance, one Trans Venezuelan woman noted, 'I can't work and have no access to money. The government needs to come up with a plan to help people who don't have jobs and can't access the emergency fund'.

Not only is individual funding for asylum seekers now inaccessible, but refugee centres also lack financing. Casa Miga does not receive funding from the Brazilian government, nor from any IO or INGO. Similarly, none of the politicians interviewed stated that the government recognized distinct vulnerable groups within the larger refugee population when considering policy or support or formulating Brazil's strategy to respond to refugee flows and COVID-19. Indeed, the Coordinator-General for CONARE (the National Committee of Refugees) confirmed that the current federal policy approach to Venezuelan refugees is to consider all Venezuelans as simply Venezuelan. The congressperson from Manaus stated, 'The government denies the existence of minorities and will not generate specific public policies for them'. The virus has accentuated the lack of preparedness of the

national government and their lack of desire to address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQI+ communities and asylum seekers (Valiquette et al., 2021).

### *Casa miga: a beacon of safety in a hostile environment*

Despite the new risks and challenges brought on by COVID-19, the eight asylum seekers interviewed during the pandemic stressed that being able to live in Casa Miga was what kept them safe and protected from the virus and violence. Casa Miga offers protection from the dual violence associated with homophobia and xenophobia that Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers face. The asylum seekers interviewed stated that they prefer to live at Casa Miga rather than other shelters. They indicated this preference for two reasons: they can make a strong community and build networks there, and they do not endure homophobic violence at Casa Miga. All the post-pandemic interviewees stated that they felt less likely to contract COVID-19 at Casa Miga. As one gay Venezuelan man said, 'without Casa Miga, I would be dead'.

### **Discussion: local actors forge their own COVID-19 responses**

What an analysis at the nexus of queer migration and counter-movements illuminates is that to understand how LGBTQI+ asylum seekers navigate their everyday experience is linked to the growing forces of counter-movements in the country. The findings highlight how LGBTQI+ Venezuelan asylum seekers navigate discrimination and threats of violence, as well as the loss of livelihood and government support during COVID-19. LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Brazil must traverse a hostile environment. Indeed, Bhagat (2018) points out that, '... the queer body exists in liminal space and queer people are actively forced into this liminality' (p. 159).

The lens of queer migration supports understanding these threats of violence, coupled with COVID-19. Gender and sexual minorities are left feeling more trapped and immobile than usual. Indeed, asylum seekers have expressed that they feel 'frozen' because COVID-19 has halted the asylum process. The pandemic has amplified the emotions that already come with a migration process known to be regulated by time; waiting, stoppage, deferrals, and delays (Lori, 2020). These heightened feelings of immobility due to the stalled asylum process, COVID-19 restrictions, and threats of violence are simultaneously a part of their experience, as queer migrants. Without legal status, asylum seekers are at the bottom of the hierarchy of being able to claim state resources. Moreover, the fake social media stories of LGBTQI+ people spreading COVID-19 combined with the existing association of migrants as COVID-19 carriers (Beech, 2020; Ghosh & Mohammad, 2020; Shen, 2020; Valsecchi & Durante, 2020; Xing, Li, Li, & Sun, 2020), greatly heightens the risk of LGBTQI+ asylum seekers being a target of violence and discrimination in public spaces. In summary, these intersectional nuances of precarity are revealed through the queer migration lens that allows analyses of migratory experiences, through multiple lenses (namely, homophobia and xenophobia heightened by COVID-19 concerns).

At the same time, Casa Miga exists in a context where there is a strong counter-movement looking to undo the gains of feminist and LGBTQI+ movements made in years past. The current levels of threats of violence against LGBTQI+ people in the country need to be understood in this context. Casa Miga thus plays a central role against the counter-movement that is growing in strength in Brazil. Our paper shows the structural forces that asylum seekers and Casa Miga are up against. The social movement lens supports the notion that a strong counter-movement in Brazil is stymying local action by LGBTQI+ and women's groups in the country (Alvarez, 2019; Brandao & Cabral, 2019; Friedman, 2019; Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020; Snyder & Wolff, 2019). Casa Miga exists in a context in which anti-gender, anti-gay counter-movements have blocked local channels for policy change. This context of anti-gender is true at the federal level with President Bolsonaro in power, as well as the state and municipal level. For instance, both the Governor of Amazonas, and the Mayor of Manaus (supporters of Bolsonaro) have come out in opposition to discussion of gender identity and

sexual orientation in public school classes. Luibhéid (2008) asserts that, 'although most nation-states may no longer bar LGBTQ migrants, their presence nonetheless challenges and disrupts practices that remain normed around racialized heterosexuality' (p.174). Understanding the backlash against gender as a type of 'gender ideology' and as a counter-movement leads us to reflect on the forces that undergird the current administration (Alvarez, 2019; Brandao & Cabral, 2019; Friedman, 2019; Payne & de Souza Santos, 2020; Snyder & Wolff, 2019).

Indeed, Casa Miga represents a place where asylum seekers can experience safety, away from the myriad dangers they face, namely xenophobia and homophobia. Casa Miga attends to the needs of LGBTQI+ asylum seekers who would otherwise be left on their own to survive, mostly having been recently outed. If asylum seekers cannot stay at Casa Miga, they have no choice but to survive in the main refugee shelters where LGBTQI+ asylum seekers have reported facing discrimination and harassment or on the streets where locals, as well as the police, have harmed them. Places like Casa Miga act as a bulwark against the structures of racialized heterosexuality that the state and counter-movements are creating, to the exclusion of marginalized others. Other community groups and grassroots organizations are also trying to fill in the gaps left by the federal response's inadequacy to COVID-19 in an anti-gender, anti-gay environment. It is not just that the government response is inadequate; LGBTQI+ asylum seekers face structural violence that is permitted and perpetuated by the state.

Furthermore, the government has a notable omission of gender and sexual minorities' considerations in its response to COVID-19. As noted earlier, the President of Brazil publicly denounces wearing a mask, and he openly reviles homosexuality. Indeed, Brazil's LGBTQI+ rights are also not being upheld, as survey data shows that LGBTQI+ Brazilian citizens are faring worse than other Brazilians amid COVID-19 (Lopez & Teixeira, 2020, June 28). As Lopez and Teixeira (2020, June 28) write for Reuters, 'One in four unemployed gay and trans Brazilians has lost their job recently during the coronavirus outbreak, a survey released on Sunday found, showing the joblessness among LGBT + Brazilians almost double the nation's overall rate'. Trans sex workers, in particular, face acute vulnerabilities in terms of a lack of work and the increasingly dangerous types of sex work they engage in, in order to survive (Phillips & Cheibub, 2020, May 21).

Without government support, Brazilian LGBTQI+ groups act on their own to protect themselves from the virus and those who think that LGBTQI+ people spread the virus. As one Brazilian LGBTQI+ activist quoted in an Associated Press (2020, July 9) article stated, 'based on the experience we had during the AIDS epidemic, when we were accused of being the vector of the virus and were left to die, we are now protecting the community'. For example, Casa Nem, a prominent LGBTQI+ shelter in Copacabana, has put together its own response to the pandemic by orchestrating a self-imposed lockdown for those in the LGBTQI+ community in Brazil (Associated Press, 2020, July 9). In addition, reporting for the New Humanitarian, Osborn (2020) notes that the COVID-19 response has fallen to community leaders in Brazil. She reports that community groups in favelas organize their own lockdown and prevention measures due to presidential inaction and obstruction. Responses to COVID-19 are cropping up from within communities, supported by local-level officials, healthcare workers, and private sector donors. In other areas, as President Bolsonaro's government pulls back state support, Black Brazilian women activists are stepping in to combat gender-based abuse during the pandemic. Writing for Open Democracy, Pereira and Aguilar (2020) underline,

Since Jair Bolsonaro's far-right government took power after closely contested 2018 elections, critical social policies have been undermined and budgets to respond to violence against women have been cut. Activists are doing the work of failed or dismantled institutions.

This discussion shows that the counter-movement and parallel inattention on the government's side, force local groups – often led by people who are made more marginal by the pandemic – are trying to make up for the lack of government support.

### ***More international attention and funding are needed for LGBTQI+ refugee centres like Casa Miga, where local channels for action are stymied***

Notwithstanding heroic local efforts, the impediments that local channels face raises the increasingly critical role of transnational and international organizations in promoting gender and sexual minorities' rights. While publications on the gendered considerations of COVID-19 by IOs like the UN (2020), ILO (2020), World Bank (2020) and the United Nations Children's Fund (2020) have been published, the focus has been primarily on women and girls and side-lines the plight of sexual and gender minorities. These publications tend to explain the importance of using a gender-based lens for reporting. For instance, IO and INGO's gender-based COVID-19 reporting tends to focus on issues like increases in domestic violence, women's job losses, and unpaid domestic labour (ILO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Some organizations have added LGBTQI+ people to their list of vulnerable groups. Yet, only a few have addressed the challenges of LGBTQI+ rights head-on: UN Women (2020), Oxfam Canada (2020), and the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) (OHCHR, 2020).

The experiences of inequality and discrimination faced by LGBTQI+ people are often compounded by ethnicity, disability, age, migration, displacement, health status, among other cross-sections of their identities (OHCHR, 2020c). Recognizing that LGBTQI+ people are at a higher risk of developing severe symptoms of COVID-19, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) urges states and other stakeholders to 'give visibility and protect LGBT persons in the context of the pandemic' and call on states to conduct research, adopt legislation and public policy to ensure that public health responses will not exacerbate the challenges already being faced by gender and sexual minorities (OHCHR, 2020c). As Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated during the release of a guidance note for states on COVID-19 and the human rights of LGBTI people, 'LGBTI people are among the most vulnerable and marginalized in many societies and among those most at risk from COVID-19'. (OHCHR, 2020a, 2020b).

While these statements put out by other UN and human rights groups call for greater recognition and protection of LGBTQI+ rights during COVID-19 (OHCHR, 2020b; UN, 2020), LGBTQI+ populations are still largely excluded in the global discourse and response (Ritholtz, 2020, June 24). For example, the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V) recognizes the special protection needs of LGBTQI+ in its reporting. However, in their document on the Priorities of the Protection Sector in Brazil, there is no specific mention of LGBTQI+ groups, although gender-based violence is recognized and accounted for (R4V, 2020).

A lack of focus and reporting from international levels is problematic when a state with advanced gender, LGBTQI+, and refugee laws on paper is made more precarious for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers. Due to the policy stances of the Bolsonaro government, backed by counter-movement forces that work to essentialize gender and promote anti-gender and anti-gay hate, places like Casa Miga need to be able to call on support from transnational sources like IOs, INGOs and other governments. Lacking state-based or state-led sources for LGBTQI+ and gender-sensitive COVID-19 responses, international appeals during the pandemic are critical. The light inclusion of LGBTQI+ considerations greatly diminishes the needs of LGBTQI+ people, and organizations' ability to advocate for more protection during the pandemic. IOs working on both the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic need to pay careful attention to the unique considerations of LGBTQI+ populations. As the pandemic rages, the concerns of those made most vulnerable by the virus should be front and centre of transnational civil society organizations and other governments' calls to action.

## **Conclusions**

By examining the environment faced by Venezuelan LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Brazil during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper found that queer migration is fraught with dangerous

everyday encounters. These everyday encounters exist within a context of a growing anti-gay anti-feminist counter-movement. The efforts of anti-gender and anti-gay counter-movements – combined with Bolsonaro’s public denunciations of the danger of COVID-19 – have complexified and weakened the local channels that women and LGBTQI+ rights activists can use and have left vulnerable populations with no government support. Volunteer-run, local non-profits like Casa Miga fill in the protection gaps to offer a modicum of support to LGBTQI+ Venezuelan asylum seekers who navigate treacherous waters daily.

The Brazilian government’s lack of attention to LGBTQI+ asylum seekers’ needs is mirrored on the world stage by the systematic exclusion of sexual and minority groups in IOs’ and INGOs’ publications advocating for gender equality amid COVID-19. Largely left out of the international discourse, ignored and unsupported nationally, and with their legal statuses in limbo, LGBTQI+ asylum seekers are left with very few resources to address their needs during the pandemic. More attention needs to be paid to these vital local responses and how to support them to be more resilient against subsequent waves of COVID-19 and future crises.

## Notes

1. The Pink Tide was the term given to the rise of left-wing and centre-left governments that swept Latin America, including Brazil, starting in the late 1990s.
2. It is worth underlining that Evangelical churches and their leaders operate independently, rather than hierarchically. Evangelical churches do not represent a cohesive institution and they each have their own agendas. For example, not all support anti-gender efforts.

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