# GEN-MIGRA PROJECT

*Gender, mobilities and migration during and post Covid-19 pandemic: Vulnerability, resilience and renewal*

T-AP Conference, October 2023

Presenter: Prof Daniela Sime, University of Strathclyde

https://www.genmigra.org/

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# GEN-MIGRA

**Aims to:**

- Transform our knowledge about the vulnerabilities experienced by women engaged in international mobilities and their agency and resilience strategies during and post Covid-19 pandemic

- Explore how migrant women have faced these challenges and produced movements of resistance and renewal, strategising and repositioning themselves in the labour market and the implications of these decisions for (transnational) family life

**Overarching research questions:**

1. What inequalities have emerged or worsened for women engaged in international mobilities during the pandemic and what role have state policies and community and kinship networks played in mitigating or increasing these inequalities?

2. What are evidence-based gender-responsive policy solutions to support women involved in international mobilities long-term, especially those most vulnerable, through sustainable state interventions of labour market (re)insertion and social protection?

# Context



- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already significant gender inequalities impacting migrant women globally including disproportionate job losses, increase in care duties, poor mental health, increase in rates of domestic violence;

- It has led to heightened inequalities that threaten the moves towards gender equality made globally in recent years;

- Migrant women have experienced particular constellations of vulnerability due to often precarious position in the labour market; immigration controls restricting access to essential services and social protection; the impact of travel restrictions of transnational family care practices;

- Several, significant barriers to integration of migrants before the pandemic in all four countries and the COVID-19 pandemic have enforced over-reliance of migrants on informal support networks;



- These vulnerabilities have been compounded by chronic underfunding of organisations supporting migrant women, racism in the labour market, policing and other statutory services, and the overhaul of immigration systems - the pandemic has been used as an excuse by governments to curtail migrants' rights.

# Theoretical approach

**Interdisciplinary approach**:
- Bringing together research in gender and mobility/migration studies, anthropology, sociology, human geography, social and public policy, kinship and family studies

**Comparative approach:**
- Four teams in four countries (Poland, Germany, Brazil and the UK) examining varied state responses to the Covid-19 crisis
- Going beyond methodological nationalism, where nation is the main analytical category for understanding migrants' social positions (Amelina and Lutz, 2019; Anthias, 2009)

**Transnational approach:**
- Examining gender and intersecting inequalities as structuring principles of mobilities (Gil, 2013)
- Exploring the new "immobility regime" (Popyk and Pustulka, 2021) and the ways intergenerational transnational care and family life has been put 'on hold' (Brandhorst *et al*., 2020)
- Making visible women's negotiations of multiple constraints and demands within and across borders (Mahler and Pessar, 2001)

**Intersectional approach:**
- Bringing together the analysis of gender, mobilities, vulnerabilities and agency
- Considering symbolic and material violence in all the relevant dimensions of women's international mobilities and well-being
- Analysing the material and social consequences of women's multiple positionings that converge to constrain their mobilities, access to resources and services, and their ability to resist violence and exploitation

# Progress with research in our partner countries

Four work packages, replicated in each country

| Work package | Sample in each country | Methods |
|---|---|---|
| **Analysing the macro-structures that have framed women's experiences of inequalities: impact of national policies** | 20-30 Experts from third sector organisations working with different migrant groups (Ukrainian refugees in Poland, EU migrants in UK, highly-skilled economic migrants, government representatives) | Policy analysis across key areas (labour market and social protection, gender-based violence)<br><br>Expert interviews |
| **Documenting the effects of the pandemic on migrant women's lives, access to labour market, social protection and services** | 30 Migrant women in each of the four countries: UK/Germany/Brazil/Poland<br><br>with different positionings in relation to the labour market and the immigration system<br><br>Brazil team carrying out additional interviews in Spain and Portugal | Individual semi-structured online interviews |
| **Evidencing the effects of the pandemic on family practices** | Matched sample design: families of migrant women, including family members abroad | 10-15 Online family interviews, using photo elicitation and picker wheel activity |
| **Identifying gender-responsive policy solutions to increased gender inequalities** | 50 policy makers, representatives of key organisations and migrant women | 'Policy Challenge' workshops<br><br>Developing a toolkit on policy interventions<br><br>Art exhibitions and events for migrants |

# UK

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in the UK

Emmaleena Käkelä and Daniela Sime University of Strathclyde, Scotland, UK

The COVID-19 pandemic and labour market inequalities experienced by migrants in the UK
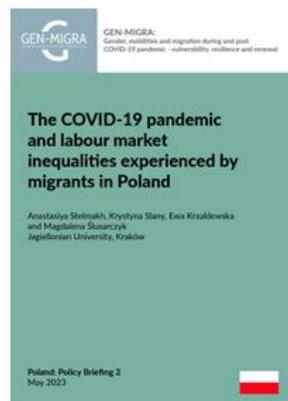Emmaleena Käkelä and Daniela Sime University of Strathclyde, Scotland, UK

# Poland

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Poland

Anastasiya Stelmakh, Krystyna Slany, Ewa Krzaklewska, Magdalena Ślusarczyk Jagiellonian University, Kraków
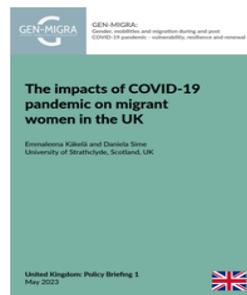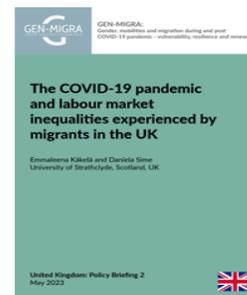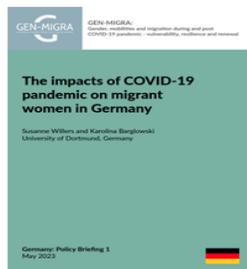
The COVID-19 pandemic and labour market inequalities experienced by migrants in Poland
Anastasiya Stelmakh, Krystyna Slany, Ewa Krzaklewska and Magdalena Ślusarczyk Jagiellonian University, Kraków

# Germany

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Germany

Susanne Willers and Karolina Barglowski University of Dortmund, Germany

The COVID-19 pandemic and labour market inequalities experienced by migrants in Germany
Susanne Willers and Karolina Barglowski University of Dortmund, Germany
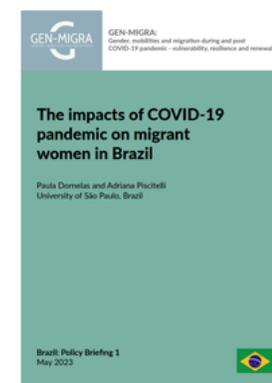
# Brazil

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Brazil

Paula Dornelas and Adriana Piscitelli University of São Paulo, Brazil
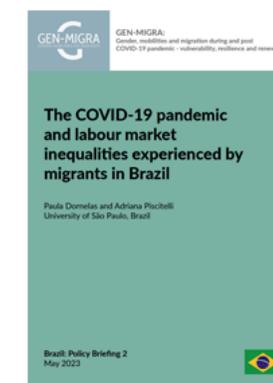
The COVID-19 pandemic and labour market inequalities experienced by migrants in Brazil
Paula Dornelas and Adriana Piscitelli University of São Paulo, Brazil

# Findings from the interviews with experts



- Most inequalities highlighted by experts were not "new", but rather issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and state responses to it;

- Findings on gendered inequalities reflect the effects of multiple crises, which have further compounded the....
  - ➤ Insufficient social protections for migrant women, leading to financial precarity and risk of destitution;
  - ➤ Heightened barriers to help-seeking, access to services and informal support networks;
  - ➤ Multiple care burdens, locally and transnationally.

- Initial findings also indicate significant long-term consequences to mental health, wellbeing and in some cases, women's immigration status.

# The perfect storm of multiple crises

- The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis have been felt alongside colliding crises, including the war in Ukraine, cost-of-living crisis and increase in inequality;

- All governments implemented a stricter approach to migrants' arrivals- In the UK, the pandemic (and recovery) have coincided with an unprecedented overhaul of the immigration system: end of Free Movement, Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Bill 2023;

- The overhaul of the immigration system has compounded the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic;

- Even prior to these developments, immigration systems had institutionalised hostility towards certain groups of migrants, manifested in emphasis on migrants' self-reliance, strategies of deterrence, widespread culture of disbelief, slow violence, and the use of destitution as a policy tool;

- In Brazil, the dismantling of local public policies for migrants took place in the context of previous government's anti-immigration stance. In Germany, only migrants in key sectors, such as care or food processing, were allowed to cross borders.

# Overhaul of immigration systems during the pandemic

- Migrant women have faced added barriers in securing status, which would enable access to state social security and key services

- **Hostile environment converging with pandemic restrictions:** Long delays in processing applications across the systems including administrative reviews, with effects extending well beyond the height of the pandemic

- Much more stringent approach to deciding on applications, reflecting entrenched culture of disbelief and suspicion in the system

- Lockdowns and the importance of "brick and mortar" places: Access to legal aid and holistic support, third sector support for applications and the refusal to extend deadlines for visas and work permits

*The Home Office delays, I think it's a massive issue. So pre-pandemic, the Home Office was slow in making decisions, but post-pandemic, it's absolutely ridiculous. We are talking about people being stuck in the [asylum] system for years and years and years. And they still use the pandemic as an excuse for their delay 3 years on.*

*We had the EUSS deadline, that was obviously bang in the middle of lockdowns. People were losing their mind, left, right and centre.*

# Struggles over 'Settled Status' of EU nationals in UK

- **Travel restrictions and absence policy**: Despite leniency in continuity of residence rules during the pandemic, some migrant women have struggled: single-long absence policy did not account for transnational circular migration patterns and the need to be with the family during the pandemic

- **Lockdown measures and cancelled weddings and funerals**: Durable partners had to prove that by December 2020, they had been together for 2 years – route to EUSS easier for partners married prior to December 2020

- **Lack of evidence on residency and refusals of entry at the border:** Particularly difficult for women due to overrepresentation in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, care responsibilities and for women who experience financial dependency

# Limited social protections for migrants across the four countries

Certain migrant women groups have been falling in between the cracks of financial support mechanisms:

- Migrant women agency workers and those on 'zero hour' contracts faced unfair dismissals, missing out on furlough

- Refugee women's struggles entering employment after gaining status during the pandemic in the UK; access to job market easier in Poland and Brazil, but other compounding challenges

- Women in certain work spaces, such as domestic workers or workers in the sex industry, more vulnerable to exploitation and violence

- Poverty built in the asylum system, compounded by the cost-of-living crisis

*There is a hidden barrier in that people that have the pre-settled status as opposed to settled status don't have the words no recourse to public funds stamped on their status, however, they are subject to a kind of hidden no recourse to public funds, because the status itself does not give access to public funds at all. In order for them to access benefits, they have to prove very complicated other legacy EU rights to reside.*

*The asylum support was not enough, it was £40 [per week] by then, but to think about ordering things online or getting food, that support was just not enough…. not being able to buy was a big one, due to increase in cost of everything.*

# Barriers to support and services

The pandemic heightened struggles over:

- Digital exclusion as services moved online, particularly felt by asylum seeking and refugee women

- Language barriers and lack of trust in services

- Social isolation

- Lack of cultural competence in service provision: social work, food banks, gender-based violence support

- Long waiting times

- Vaccine misinformation

- Constrained eligibility: Right to work, limitations in access to welfare and other benefits

- Digitisation of the immigration system

- Use of unsuitable accommodation, particularly hotels and MBUs, homelessness of destitute migrants

- Hostile environment and the complexity of the immigration system, creating suspicion, or hesitancy to act

# Family and care



- **Travel restrictions and social distancing rules** acutely felt by migrant women who disproportionately rely on informal support networks for wellbeing, and who in turn contribute significantly to family wellbeing through multiple forms of care: home-schooling and looking after the children, financial support, emotional care both locally and transnationally;

- The way family tensions and care burdens interact with structural inequalities impacts women's safety, financial security, wellbeing and immigration status;

- Pandemic setting women back long-term: Impact of economic development, mental health and integration journeys;

- Family separation, divorce and bereavement experienced by many, sometimes from a distance.

*People are here because they need to, they have financial commitments at home, they have parents they have to sustain, they have medical bills they have to pay. So, you are put in a position where you have to choose, whether there is going to be money, and there will be food on a table back home, or there will be no one to care for those people back at home. They that was very often the decision that was put on women, which was a huge strain.*

# New risks to migrant women as a result of the pandemic

- Poor integration policies mean that migrant women and their families rely on voluntary sector organisations for basic support or ad-hoc support from potential gangmasters and traffickers;

- In Portugal, the pandemic period coincided with the rise of the extreme right in the country, which previously focused on discrimination against Roma and now targets other migrants, including Brazilians;

- Women in domestic work were forced to live in their employers' homes, subject to virus contamination, extended working hours and sexual violence;

- Given the loss of employment, many migrant women and asylum seekers from Haiti, Congo, Senegal, and Afghanistan decided to leave the country and seek better conditions in the United States via dangerous routes, crossing Colombia, Panama and Mexico; the same situation was reported with Ukrainian refugees in Poland;

- Migrant women from South American countries in Brazil (especially Bolivia and Venezuela) highlighted the increase in cases of domestic violence, as well as racism and xenophobia, as some of the biggest problems they faced during the pandemic.

# Concluding remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to stay **put in-place**, but a stringent immigration system is seeking to **push them out**: restricted access to services, support networks and social protection contributes to isolation and feeling **out-of-place.**

The pandemic has acted as a **smokescreen**, creating openings for intentionally harsher immigration practices, forcing people to live long-term in inadequate conditions and uncertainty.

While the pandemic is "over", migrant women and their families are still struggling over the state responses (such as use of hotel accommodation), and their long-term consequences (uncertainty over immigration status, mental health, disruptions to integration journeys, family breakdown…)

The pandemic has pushed transnational migrant women **between a rock and a hard place**: **making difficult decisions** over caring for loved ones here and there, and **choosing** between short-term needs and long-term consequences to immigration status.

# Implications for policy

- Many of the vulnerabilities experienced by migrants in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic are not new, but have instead been heightened by the pandemic;

- The specific economic vulnerabilities experienced by migrants in the UK need to be examined in relation to cross-cutting policy areas, whereby access to employment and social security entitlements are inherently tied to immigration status;

- Migrant women's access to support mechanisms and wider social security provision have been further complicated by their precarious labour market position, caring responsibilities or insecure immigration status;

- We want to problematize further the gendered consequences of the pandemic and propose that future policies need to adopt an intersectional lens to identify sustainable solutions.

# Selected outputs and events the team have presented at

**Outputs**

Piscitelli, A. (2023) *Fighting Human Trafficking Away From a Human Rights Frame: the Effects of Anti-Trafficking Regimes in Brazil*. In: Mathilde Darley. (Org.). Trafficking and Sex Work Gender, Race and Public Order. Routledge, 2023, v. 1, p. 217-230

Piscitelli, A. (2023) *Fear and Human Trafficking.* In: Coelho, Maria Claudia; Beleli Iara. (Org.). Emotions and Public Policies. Lisboa: Etnografica Press, v.1, 199-230.

Ribeiro, J. C. (2023) The Cultural Other: Migrants, refugees and the gender violence victim, Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad, Brazil: Rio de Janeiro.

Slany, K. et al. (2023) The temporariness of policies in crises – the case of Poland's migration policies under COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Book chapter.

Several articles in preparation, including collaborative work between the teams

**Conferences and events**

*Brazilian Women's Home Making in Portugal: New Faces of Gendered and Racialized Xenophobia?* Workshop Migration and Belonging in Times of Crisis. University of Geneve (Brazil team)

*The support of Polish institutions and NGOs for refugees from Ukraine* (Poland team)

*Ukrainian women as subjects of migration policies in the context of the pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine* (Poland team)

*Help for refugee women experiencing different forms of violence: the role of NGOs* (Poland team)

*Unintended consequences? The impact of state responses on migrant women's vulnerabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic* (UK team)

*Precarious migrant women in pandemic times: What can we learn from the emergency policy responses and the need for gender-responsive policy interventions* (UK Team)

# The benefits and challenges of our transatlantic collaboration

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