

Of Coloniality, Conspiracies and Men –

The Intensification of Intersectional Social Inequalities during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil

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With [more than 4 million officially registered infections and over 130.000 deaths](#) (September 2020), Brazil is one of the countries that are most severely afflicted by COVID-19, globally just third to India and the US. During the beginning of the pandemic, in April 2020, the richer and more cosmopolitan urban areas of the country were most severely affected, with people ‘importing’ the virus through business and leisure travel. Since then, the center of the pandemic in Brazil has shifted to the impoverished and densely populated [favelas, rural areas](#) with a lack of infrastructure and [indigenous communities](#). A trend that can be observed all [around the world](#).

As in other regions of the world, COVID-19 in Brazil illuminates the already existing societal disparities and intersectional power structures, exacerbating issues of access to healthcare, sanitation, job security and exploitative working conditions. The first reported death caused by COVID-19 tragically illustrates these societal dynamics. The domestic worker Cleonice Gonçalves caught the virus from her employer, who had recently come back from her ski trip to Italy in March. Even though the employer showed symptoms and was tested directly after her return, she did not tell her housekeeper about the positive result of the test, exposing the 63-year-old Gonçalves to the virus. Gonçalves died only a few weeks later in a suburb of Rio, having been especially vulnerable due to her diabetes.

Similar stories of domestic workers who had to continue to work unprotected in the home of their employers despite the employer’s positive COVID-19 test results were [reported all over Brazil](#). The situation of domestic workers in Brazil - the overwhelming majority of which are black women - is especially precarious, as they have one of the highest rates of informal employment. A remnant of the colonial organization of Brazilian society, many domestic workers [live in the home of their employers](#), making formalization and enforcement of labor laws especially difficult, while also hindering protective measures against the virus. This way, during the pandemic, the unstable and unsafe situation of domestic workers becomes illustrative of Brazilian society’s divisions and stark inequality.¹

As in other regions of the world, [women had to bear a large portion of the burden of the pandemic](#), being the majority of vulnerable care workers and teachers. [Similar to other countries](#), cases of domestic violence against women as well as femicides increased significantly in most Brazilian states during the lockdown and social isolation measures. Social isolation and rising unemployment aggravated these issues in a country that was already suffering from high incidences of gender-based

¹ Domestic Workers in Brazil took up a [central symbolic role](#) in the last decade in the fights against social inequality, being firmly situated at the marginalized intersections of race, class and gender. They were one of the last professional groups in Brazil, after a decade long fight of domestic workers unions, to be granted full labor rights as demanded by the international labor organization. The legal situation of domestic workers was one of the central issues in a polarized political climate of street protests, parliamentary coups and contested elections in the 2010s.

(intimate partner) violence. [According to a study](#) by the university of Minas Gerais, almost 40% of women experienced domestic violence during early quarantine in March and April. Many of them reported experiencing domestic violence for the first time or experiencing an increase in the quantity and intensity of violence. The fact that many women are cut off from support networks and several crisis centers and women shelters closed their doors or became almost impossible to reach safely, likely also led to an increase in underreporting of domestic violence. Considering that, the [rising numbers of incidences](#) are especially alarming.

Among the most affected segments of the population, indigenous women in Brazil are particularly vulnerable, as they are among the [world's most vulnerable groups for femicide](#). They are also often responsible for the (medical) care work in their communities and therefore particularly exposed to the virus. Indigenous communities were initially thought to be better protected due to their geographical seclusion, but [illegal mining and logging activities](#) as well as [government health-care workers](#) brought the virus to even the most secluded communities.² Today, due to their lack of sanitation and health care infrastructure, high rates of poverty as well as their frequently communal living situations, indigenous people are among the groups with the [highest risk of mortality from COVID-19](#).

The vulnerability of Brazil's society to the corona virus has been exacerbated by the lack of a systematic and coherent response from the federal, state and municipal governments. While many regions and cities introduced strict lockdown and hygiene measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus, President Jair Bolsonaro is dismissive of the dangers of COVID-19 and called it a '[little flu](#)' that people should not worry about, emphasizing that '[everyone has to die at some point](#)'. The former soldier and paratrooper constantly reaffirmed that the virus could not harm him because he is '[an athlete](#)', mobilizing a discourse of military masculinity in which he is protected by a seemingly indestructible 'body armor'.³ This attitude of a survival-of-the-fittest in the face of a deadly pandemic is a continuation of a governmental necropolitics that deems the most marginalized and vulnerable groups of Brazilian society expendable and subjugates them to (political) violence. Bolsonaro further went on to demand that people should face the corona virus '[like a man, not like a boy](#)' and explained that protective masks are for '[fags](#)'. These statements are part of the same heterosexist discourse that has been an integral part of Bolsonaro's public image since he became a congressman in the 1990s.

When he was not downplaying the dangers of the pandemic, Bolsonaro called the virus an invention from a '[communist laboratory](#)'. According to him, the pandemic is part of a global 'cultural Marxist'

² Recalling the decimation of Brazilian indigenous tribes through diseases imported by European colonists like malaria, pox or measles.

³ A discourse that is strongly connected to the fascist imaginary, and the 'natural selection' of weak bodies. The fact that Bolsonaro's own corona infection only resulted in relatively mild symptoms supported his narrative. For a discussion of military masculinity and the concept of 'body armor' see Klaus Theweleit's seminal work 'Male Fantasies' (*Männerphantasien*) on the sociopsychological basis of national socialism.

conspiracy, which aims to overthrow the Brazilian government and subjugate the Brazilian people to a communist dictatorship. The notion of a communist conspiracy has become a kind of '[symbolic glue](#)' among Christian fundamentalists, conservatives, neoliberals and the military - the major fractions of the Brazilian right. This conspiracy is aided by what he calls 'gender ideology', the propagation of sexual diversity and gender equality, as well as 'unearned privileges' in the form of racial quotas in public institutions and social welfare programs.

It is ironic that one of these social programs Bolsonaro is attacking is responsible for his [current surge in popularity](#) among the poorest Brazilians. After immense pressure from civil organizations and left-wing and liberal parties, and facing resistance from the government⁴, the Brazilian congress passed an emergency assistance program that guaranteed a basic income for low- and no-income Brazilians during the crisis. This includes an [additional payment for single parent households](#), a demand introduced by the women's caucus and aimed at relieving economic distress of particularly vulnerable families during the crisis. In the End of August 2020 more Brazilians relied mainly on the [emergency social aid](#) than on [regulated formal employment](#). Due to a personalized notion of politics that leads to a conflation of the government as a whole with the figure of the president, the influx of the emergency aid prompted a [surge in Bolsonaro's approval ratings among Brazil's poorest](#), despite his resistance to the measures.⁵

Bolsonaro and his ministers also tried to exploit the opportunity of the public health crisis⁶ to introduce neoliberal measures and right-wing policies in other areas of government. SUS, the free Universal Healthcare System in Brazil, which had already been under attack, is under severe stress of 'cost reduction' measures and initiatives for 'increased efficiency' aimed at dismantling the public system. The already restrictive abortion laws⁷ were another target of right-wing politicians under the cover of the pandemic, as well as the protection of Brazil's forests and indigenous population. Most prominently, Bolsonaro stopped a policy initiative that would have guaranteed clean water for indigenous communities and relieved some of the pressure on the indigenous people in Brazil among the country's many crises.

The precarious situation of indigenous women as well as domestic workers illustrates a situation of sharp intersectional inequalities in Brazil that is a continuation of colonial power structures which has

⁴ In the highly fragmented Brazilian political system changing coalitions between parties have a strong influence on the implementation of policies, even against the resistance of the President and the historically weak governing coalitions.

⁵ This led to a recalibration of the core electorate of Bolsonaro. During the Presidential Campaign in 2018 he was mainly supported by the middle- and upper classes, well-educated white (male) urban populations of the richer Brazilian South and South-East. He was extremely unpopular in the poorest regions in the Brazilian Northeast, something that has now started to change with the involuntarily introduction of the more populist emergency income.

⁶ The public health crisis exacerbates a continuous economic and political crisis in the country that has been going on at least since 2012.

⁷ Abortion in Brazil is considered a crime against human life unless there is no other way to save the life of the mother, the pregnancy is the result of a rape or the child would be born with anencephaly. It is punishable by up to three years of prison.

intensified during the pandemic. Women in general suffer under the conditions of social isolation due to an increase in gender-based violence. The actions of President Jair Bolsonaro and his government contribute to the severity of the situation in Brazil, as conspiracy theories, heterosexist notions of masculine ideals, and the minimization of the severity of COVID-19, all undermine regional and communal attempts to protect against the spread of the virus. The most marginalized groups in the country are the ones that are paying the price for the government's inaction and distractions in face of a deadly pandemic.

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