

## Migration and precarious work: Understanding the intersection between social categories

*Migração e precarização do trabalho: compreendendo a interseção  
entre categorias sociais*

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**ABSTRACT** Brazil has received a significant influx of immigrants from the Global South, largely composed of women who are part of precarious work networks. The aim was to reflect on the precariousness of work in the context of South-South migration, considering the intersection between gender, race-ethnicity and social class in determining subalternity and inequities. Reflective and argumentative essay structured around two cores of meaning: i) conceptual review, which recovers definitions from seminal works and ii) critical analysis of articles selected for their relevance and current status in the field of migration and feminist studies. The results revealed that the precariousness of these women's work is not restricted to an economic issue but reflects historical and structural inequalities deeply marked by intersectionalities that reinforce cycles of marginalization and inequality. Xenophobia, racism and sexism act in conjunction with social class to create and perpetuate subalternity and inequities both at work and in life. Intersectional approach is powerful for understanding multiple oppressions that perpetuate the exploitation of immigrant women in the context of South-South migration in Brazil.

**KEYWORDS** Job market. Gender studies. Human migration. Social class. Intersectional framework.

**RESUMO** O Brasil tem recebido um importante fluxo de imigrantes do Sul Global, em grande parte composto por mulheres que se inserem em redes de trabalho precarizado. Objetivou-se refletir sobre a precarização do trabalho no contexto da migração Sul-Sul, considerando a interseção entre gênero, raça-etnia e classe social na determinação de subalternidades e iniquidades. Ensaio reflexivo e argumentativo estruturado a partir de dois núcleos de sentido: i) a revisão conceitual, que recupera definições a partir de obras seminais; e ii) a análise crítica de artigos selecionados por sua relevância e atualidade no campo dos estudos migratórios e feministas. Os resultados revelaram que a precarização do trabalho dessas mulheres não se restringe a uma questão econômica, mas reflete desigualdades históricas e estruturais profundamente marcadas por interseccionalidades que reforçam ciclos de marginalização e desigualdade. A xenofobia, o racismo e o sexismo atuam em articulação com a classe social, originam e perpetuam subalternidades e iniquidades tanto no trabalho quanto na vida. A abordagem interseccional é potente para compreender múltiplas opressões que perpetuam a exploração das mulheres imigrantes no contexto da migração Sul-Sul no Brasil.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Mercado de trabalho. Estudos de gênero. Migração humana. Classe social. Enquadramento interseccional.

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## Introduction

The precariousness of labor relations has increased in the current globalized economic model, causing transformations in the harmful logic of capital reproduction. Labor mobility, intensified by processes of deregulation and flexibilization, accompanies the growing circulation of people on an international scale. In this scenario, migratory movements become central elements in meeting the demands of productive sectors that depend on cheap and easily replaceable labor. Immigration, particularly in countries of the Global South, reflects a dynamic of displacement motivated not only by political and humanitarian crises, but also by structural inequalities within the capitalist system itself, which segments and hierarchizes workers through conjunctural relationships that permeate intersections of nationality, social class, race, ethnicity, and gender.

The use of immigrant labor from the South is one of the levers of Northern capitalism, leading to the devaluation of labor, particularly Asian, African, and Latin American, within the international division of labor. South-South migration flows currently lack the weight of South-North flows, but they are steadily growing, especially for refugee and forcibly displaced populations. Many of these flows have the South as their destination due to geographic proximity or even as an alternative transit route to enable the more desired goal of one day entering the North, where the gains (direct and indirect) tend to be, on average, higher<sup>1,2</sup>.

There are striking differences, however, in the type of immigrant who can successfully enter the Brazilian labor market: well-received immigrants who are qualified and come from the Global North<sup>1,3</sup>. On the other hand, immigrants from countries in the Global South, upon arriving in Brazil, often face precarious labor market integration, with less access to labor rights, informality, and greater social vulnerability. This precariousness of immigrant labor, permeated by class, race, ethnicity, and

gender inequalities, reveals itself as neoliberal globalization, reinforcing historical asymmetries and imposing new forms of exploitation for those who move in search of better living conditions<sup>4-7</sup>.

Thus, given the vulnerability of immigrants within the working class, due to their foreign origin, ethnicity, religion, lack of documents, and large numbers the exploitation of their labor becomes even more predatory. This leads to several consequences, such as access to simple, manual labor jobs, often incompatible with the worker's qualifications, atypical and temporary contracts, exhausting work hours, and restricted or absent rights. Capital owners tend to rely on this labor force to reduce maintenance, reproduction, and retirement costs while simultaneously benefiting from a precarious and discriminated workforce<sup>2</sup>.

Brazil has a long tradition as a historically migrant-receiving nation. In recent decades, it has been the destination of various migratory flows, each marked by distinct characteristics and challenges. Bolivian immigration, for example, gained momentum in the 1980s, with a strong presence in São Paulo, particularly in the textile sector, where many workers still face informality and precarious working conditions. In the early 2010s, the country began receiving a growing number of Haitians, driven by the devastating earthquake of that year, which left millions homeless. Many of them entered through the state of Acre and spread throughout Brazil in search of better living conditions, although they encountered difficulties related to regularization and entering the labor market<sup>8-10</sup>.

Currently, Brazil is experiencing another significant wave of migration with the arrival of Venezuelans, forced to leave their country due to the political and socioeconomic crisis that has been worsening since 2015. This migratory flow directly impacts the state of Roraima, the main gateway for this population, who cross the border daily in search of refuge and job opportunities. Women have been arriving in large numbers, changing the traditional

immigration profile of men seeking better working conditions than in their country of origin<sup>6</sup>.

Based on the above, this essay aims to reflect on the precariousness of work in the context of South-South migration, with a focus on the immigration of Venezuelan women to Brazil, considering the intersection between gender, race-ethnicity and social class in the social determination of subalternity and consequent inequities to which they are subjected.

## Material and methods

### Theoretical-philosophical framework

Gender, social class, and race-ethnicity are powerful social categories for understanding the construction and reproduction of individual and collective identities, determining social relations between individuals and groups, as well as institutional dynamics. Although they can be analyzed separately, it is essential to consider them in an integrated manner, since the social production and reproduction of individuals and groups occur through the interconnection between these elements<sup>11,12</sup>.

Emerging from Black feminism<sup>13,14</sup>, intersectionality theory has sought to analyze social phenomena based on social markers of difference derived from the categories of gender, social class, and race-ethnicity. This approach inaugurates a new theoretical-methodological approach that seeks to analyze the complexity and irreducibility of one social marker of difference over another. These markers are defined as social constructions that predate the existence of subjects, which articulate, producing greater or lesser inclusions or exclusions, depending on a series of social elements.

[...] thus allow for a broader understanding of inequities, through the possibility of including the complex ways in which social markers relate to and reinforce each other<sup>15</sup>.

According to Hankivsky and Bowleg cited by Oliveira<sup>15</sup>:

Intersectionality is promising because it emphasizes that the 'whole' of discrimination experienced by a person is complex and greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, intersectionality can be considered a theoretical and methodological approach to understanding social inequalities and proposing political actions to combat them.

Thus,

[...] the intersectional approach considers that no difference should be reduced to a single classification system, in order not to lose the strength of the articulation that it proposes for the social markers of difference, in order to understand the various dimensions of inequalities that shape and influence social positions, the experiences of subjects and the power relations that they establish in society<sup>15</sup>.

### METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This work is characterized as a reflective and argumentative essay. This type of production critically analyzes a topic, articulating theoretical concepts, evidence, and interpretations, based on relevant scientific literature. It differs from literature reviews in that it does not adopt rigidly systematized methodologies for source selection. Its construction is based primarily on the expertise of the authors, who select the most relevant materials, including classic and contemporary studies, guided by their experience in the field at hand.

In this sense, the development of this essay was guided by a dialectical perspective that articulates concepts and their correlations to understand reality. The analyses undertaken were based on associations and/or analogies, without, however, submitting

to the formalism of traditional scientific techniques. This methodological choice aims to promote a more critical and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena<sup>16</sup>.

In methodological terms, empirically, this text is structured based on two cores of meaning: i) the conceptual review, which recovers founding definitions on intersectionality, gender, class and race-ethnicity based on seminal works; and ii) a critical analysis of articles selected for their relevance and timeliness in the field of migration and feminist studies. The selection of sources, while not systematic, prioritized recent studies (from the last five years) with high academic impact; established classics; and works supported by the authors' experience in the field. Additionally, empirical data on female migration in Brazil, with an emphasis on Roraima, were incorporated to illustrate the theoretical discussions.

## Results and discussion

### Women and Immigration: The Impact of Gender on Job Integration and Working Conditions

To understand the migration phenomenon in relation to women, a reflection centered on the feminine, focusing on the category of gender, is necessary, since gender relations are socially hierarchical and established based on sexual differences, often preceding or permeating all other social relations. This occurs because sexual difference defines limits and possibilities from the beginning of life, today even before birth. It is likely that, in many societies, gender is recognized before other differences, for example, race-ethnicity or social class. However, it is certain that all these social categories: gender, generation, social class, and race-ethnicity, are deeply intertwined in the construction of both subjectivities and collectivities, determining experiences and positions in the world in an interdependent and complex manner<sup>12</sup>.

Beginning in the 1970s, particularly in the United States, studies on gender and feminist anthropology emerged, making significant contributions based on investigations of diverse social contexts. This research helped consolidate the concept of gender as a relevant category for social analysis while also highlighting the complexity of social relations. As a result, the concept of gender came to be understood as an essential element for understanding societal dynamics<sup>17</sup>.

Furthermore, the category of gender refers to the social, cultural, and linguistic constructs that define the perceived differences between people of different sexes. This analytical approach makes it possible to understand that gender inequalities are not the result of biological characteristics, but are socially determined. In other words, gender refers to the relationships that are constructed between the sexes within society, distinguishing biological from social sex. While the former involves anatomical and physiological aspects, the latter concerns the norms and expectations imposed by different societies throughout history. However, attempting to separate the biological from the social can hinder understanding the processes that shape these relationships, given that these elements are completely interconnected and dependent<sup>12</sup>.

Under the aegis of androcentrism or patriarchy, gender roles are constantly reaffirmed in everyday life, both in public and private settings. In the social division of labor, these roles reinforce the idea that biological differences between the sexes result in inequality, naturalizing the idea that women are inferior and submissive while men hold supremacy and privileges<sup>17</sup>.

Regarding migrant women, theoretical advancements occurred in parallel with the expansion of feminist studies and in line with research on international migration. The articulation between feminist theories and migration studies made it possible to remove the protagonism of women in this phenomenon from a gender perspective<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, in the context of migration, it is crucial to understand gender dynamics, especially with regard to work. Immigrant women face specific challenges resulting from the intertwining of gender issues with social class and race/ethnicity, which can directly affect their labor market integration and working conditions. Analyzing these issues is necessary to understand the working conditions of immigrant women, as gender issues and their intersections can intensify in unfavorable situations, leading to increased precariousness and social vulnerability for these women.

The dominant paradigm for interpreting female migration links it directly to demand and insertion into the labor market in places associated with the reproduction of gender roles. This perspective contributes to women being primarily employed in the care sector, such as domestic workers, nannies, nurses, and elderly caregivers. Furthermore, social expectations regarding women's roles in caregiving and domestic tasks often result in these workers being forced into informal, low-paid jobs lacking job security<sup>18</sup>.

In Roraima, and particularly in the city of Boa Vista, there is a significant presence of Venezuelan immigrant women occupying roles traditionally associated with caregiving and domestic work. Housekeepers, nannies, and elderly caregivers are common professions among these women, who often work for middle- and upper-class families in the city's more affluent neighborhoods.

In Boa Vista, faced with a lack of job opportunities, poverty, and low earnings from informal activities, many Venezuelan immigrants end up opting for sex work as a means of subsistence. This profession, highly stigmatized in Christian and/or conservative societies, exposes these women to an even greater risk of gender-based violence because they are prostitutes, women, and immigrants, factors that place them in situations of multiple vulnerability.

From 2010 to 2019, Brazil received new migratory flows, which contradicted the trends

of South-North migration and were characterized by a more masculine orientation. This fact made female migratory experiences invisible, since, in absolute numbers, immigrant women accounted for, on average, one-third of all arrivals into the country, and were also less present in the labor market. However, from the second half of the last decade, until the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in the number of immigrant women arriving in the country and entering the labor market<sup>18,19</sup>.

During this period, the presence of South American and Caribbean immigrants became more significant, particularly Haitian and Venezuelan immigrants, most of whom were young and single. The main sectors for these women were service work, especially cleaning public spaces and businesses. Research also reveals wage disparities between immigrant men and women, as well as variations in income according to nationality. Generally speaking, the average salary for immigrant women in Brazil is around two minimum wages<sup>10,19,20</sup>.

The analysis of gender dynamics in the context of South-South migration therefore reveals a scenario marked by structural inequalities that intensify the working conditions of immigrant women. Thus, female migration not only reproduces historically constructed gender asymmetries but also amplifies them, placing immigrant women in situations of extreme vulnerability. Furthermore, patriarchy, so prevalent in today's capitalist world, places women in situations of inequality, both in the production process and in social reproduction<sup>2</sup>.

The insertion of immigrant women into the labor market is not determined solely by gender, but also by a complex network that includes national origin, socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

Next, we will explore how social class and race/ethnicity influence the trajectories of immigrants in Brazil, highlighting the structural barriers that limit their opportunities



and perpetuate the exploitation of their labor force. Analyzing these intersections allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of precarious employment affecting immigrants, especially those from the Global South, and how these dynamics reinforce historical inequalities in the context of neoliberal globalization.

#### **SOCIAL CLASS, RACE-ETHNICITY AND WORK OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN**

The interpretation of social phenomena in light of classical Marxism uses stratification by social classes to determine the position of individuals in society, especially in class societies. This category is widely consolidated in studies that adopt a historical and dialectical perspective<sup>12</sup>.

Social classes can be understood as groups or strata of individuals differentiated by their objective position in the productive structure of society. Thus, the class system establishes a hierarchy and can be defined as a historical-social form of stratification. This organization reflects the power relations and inequalities inherent in the mode of production, highlighting how one's position in the social structure influences the material conditions and life opportunities of individuals<sup>21</sup>.

In addition to social class and gender, already discussed, intersectionality theory also relies on the marker of race-ethnicity. Initially, it is important to elucidate the concept of racialization, understood as the political, ideological, and social processes that identify and dichotomize certain populations based on their phenotypic characteristics, whether real or imaginary. Such processes act as mediators of social relations between whites and non-whites, as they (re)produce and sustain social hierarchies based on discriminatory perspectives. In the case of Brazil, racialization processes are deeply rooted in the idea of population whitening<sup>22-24</sup>.

Historically, the Europeanizing logic of hygiene, by imposing the extinction of the

non-white population through miscegenation, generated not only violence against this population but also difficulties in the realm of ideas, particularly in the debate about the white population and its privileges. The legacy of this logic continues to produce effects today, such as the perpetuation of structural racism, generating political and social disparities between groups with these markers of difference—that is, between whites and non-whites. These dynamics, directly or indirectly, also resonate with immigrants, influencing their experiences and integration into society<sup>24,25</sup>.

However, alongside harmful migration processes, Brazil appears to be experiencing a welcome migration process, characterized by the influx of skilled and specialized immigrants. This type of immigration generally, but not exclusively, occurs through legal channels and facilitated entry to work in various key sectors of the national economy. It is officially represented as a product of the strong selectivity of the labor market, as well as the guidelines of national development policy, primarily to address the country's lack of qualified professionals to work in specific sectors<sup>3</sup>.

This trend reflects labor market selectivity, aligned with national development policy guidelines that seek to attract skilled labor to areas where there is a shortage of professionals. However, this welcome immigration is not only a response to economic needs, but also a phenomenon that highlights intersections of social class and race/ethnicity, as skilled immigrants from the Global North are generally white and from high-income countries.

This dynamic suggests selection based on the intersection of social class and race-ethnicity. The preference for immigrants from the developed world, coupled with the predominant racial profile of these flows, reinforces the hierarchical structure of the workforce in Brazil. While white immigrants with skilled and specialized profiles from countries in the Global North occupy

privileged positions in the labor market, those from the Global South, especially Black and Indigenous people, face structural and qualification barriers that relegate them to precarious and low-paying jobs.

Thus, the position of countries in the international division of labor has historically placed them in a situation of inequality, particularly with the colonial and neocolonial process, determining the racialization of peoples and cultures, and the resulting inferiorization and discrimination, which aim to devalue the workforce.

### THE HIGHLIGHTED REALITY

The migratory reality in Brazil is marked by a predominance of immigrants from the Global South, who represent the majority of recent flows. According to the Brazilian Immigration Report, available on the Labor Immigration Portal, linked to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, in 2023, cited by Vendramini<sup>2</sup>, there were nearly 400,000 movements of international immigrant workers into the Brazilian formal labor market, with 47,200 jobs created for this workforce. For the second consecutive year, increases were observed in both the movement and the number of jobs created for immigrants. Regarding nationalities, in addition to Venezuelans remaining in first place, the presence of Cubans, Argentines, Paraguayans, and Angolans stands out. As for Haitians, who were once the main formal labor force in the country, for the third consecutive year, they are experiencing job losses<sup>2</sup>.

The Haitian migration flow is considered the second largest displacement to Brazil in the last decade. Data indicate that more than 100,000 Haitians migrated to Brazil by 2018, including 64,628 men and 30,869 women, with a predominance of people in the 25-40 age group (57,385)<sup>20,24,26-28</sup>.

These figures highlight the importance of Haitians in Brazil's immigrant workforce,

reinforcing the centrality of flows from the Global South. However, they also highlight the difficulties faced by these groups, especially in a context marked by job insecurity and instability<sup>20</sup>.

In the case of Haitian immigrant women, the reverberations of racialized xenophobia significantly impact their difficulty in accessing employment opportunities. Ethnic-racial prejudice, directly or indirectly, affects these immigrants, since, due to their characteristically Black phenotype, they are also racialized and seen as inferior based on the social marker of race and ethnicity<sup>27</sup>. This dynamic reinforces the exclusion and marginalization of these women, who face additional barriers to entering the job market, perpetuating cycles of inequality and discrimination, as a form of criminalization.

The criminalization of immigrants forced into hiding is another mechanism that reinforces their inferiority and exploitation. According to Basso and Perocco<sup>29</sup>, racism is a social relationship of oppression that manifests itself at the intersections of class, race, nation, and gender. In the Brazilian context, the stigmatization of immigrants from the Global South, especially those who arrive in Brazil under dire socioeconomic conditions, legitimizes discriminatory practices that contribute to their exclusion from access to basic rights and subject them to degrading working and living conditions. This dynamic not only perpetuates historical inequalities but also reinforces the prevailing international division of labor.

In the far north of Brazil, research shows that Venezuelan immigrants forced to work as sex workers face multiple forms of discrimination: for being prostitutes, Venezuelan, and largely of Indigenous or Black descent. This description is present in local media narratives that often reinforce stereotypes, particularly those related to their work. Such media representations not only legitimize discriminatory practices

but also contribute to the marginalization of these women, who perform their work in degrading ways, exposing them to violence and exploitation, and hindering their access to basic rights<sup>6,30</sup>.

In Boa Vista, the capital of the state of Roraima, although there is no official data to prove it, it is clear that immigrant women face vulnerable living and working conditions, including the low pay they receive for their services. There are indications that the wages paid to these workers are lower than those offered to Brazilian women in similar positions, reflecting a dynamic of exploitation that feeds on these women's social precariousness. Furthermore, the lack of proper documentation and ignorance of labor rights can contribute to their being subjected to undervalued, poorly paid jobs and unfavorable working conditions, perpetuating the cycle of vulnerability. This reality highlights how inequalities of class, gender, and race/ethnicity, combined with their immigrant status, reinforce the marginalization of these women and their precarious quality of life.

One consequence of this multifaceted condition is violence against immigrant women in precarious work situations, such as those working in prostitution. This violence permeates intersections of gender and race-ethnicity, heightening their vulnerability to potential and actual violence. Discrimination based on nationality, coupled with classism, sexism, racism, and xenophobia, creates a scenario in which, in addition to the structural violence represented by the absence of rights, aggressions of various kinds occur, both from the native population and from aggressors who exploit the status of immigrant, foreign, Indigenous, or Black women to perpetrate violence. This overlapping oppression reflects the structural inequalities that characterize these women's work, highlighting how the intersection of social class, gender, and race-ethnicity directly determines their living and working conditions, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and violence.

## Final considerations

This essay aims to demonstrate that the intersectionality of gender, social class, and race-ethnicity reveals how immigrant women, especially those from countries in the Global South, face multiple forms of oppression, often occupying precarious, informal, and undervalued jobs. These forms of oppression originate from the structural interplay between neoliberal capitalism, which creates class inequalities and inequities; androcentrism, which creates gender inequalities and inequities; and racism-ethnicism, which creates ethnic-racial inequalities, reinforcing the marginalization of these workers in the labor market and, consequently, in life.

This phenomenon is deeply marked by intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. This precariousness reinforces cycles of marginalization and inequality. The intersectionality between these social markers reveals how structures of power and oppression intertwine, perpetuating the subordination of immigrant women in their working lives. Xenophobia, racism, and sexism contribute to these workers being seen as less valuable. Thus, the precariousness of work is not only an economic issue but also a reflection of the historical and structural inequalities that characterize the division of labor.

Reflecting on the precariousness of immigrant labor from an intersectional perspective proved to be a valuable way to understand how gender, race/ethnicity, and social class intertwine, increasing the vulnerability of these groups. This approach revealed the stigmatization, violence, and marginalization these women face, exacerbated by their status as foreigners, poor, and often racialized.

Understanding the precariousness of immigrant women's work in Brazil therefore requires an approach that considers the multiple forms of oppression these women face. Overcoming this situation requires inclusive public policies that guarantee labor rights, social protection, and combat discrimination,



as well as a cultural shift that recognizes the dignity and humanity of migrant populations. Only with effective and integrated actions will it be possible to break the inequities that perpetuate the subordination and exploitation of immigrant women in the context of South-South migration.

## Collaborators

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