

Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on Bolivian immigrants in São Paulo, Brazil

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Contextualization

Since the 1990s, Bolivian workers have become a major component of the local garment industry in São Paulo, Brazil. Bolivian immigrants typically live and work in home-based garment-industry sweatshops, where they frequently face highly precarious labor conditions, such as 16-hour workdays, low wages, unsafe working environments, occupational health issues, wage theft and servitude by debt, in the most extreme cases. Most sweatshops are owned by Bolivian immigrants who rent a house, set up sewing machines in the living room or garage areas, hire their compatriots as sewists, and use the rest of the space as improvised bedrooms for themselves, workers, and their families. Living in the sweatshops, sewists' reproductive conditions are also precarized, as the food provided by employers may lack in quantity and quality, parents are not given free time to care for their children, and bedroom arrangements can be uncomfortable, unsafe, and even unhealthy.

Fieldwork

In this research project, I investigated the main impacts of the first 18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 to August 2021) on Bolivian sweatshop workers. However, I had to grapple with the challenges of doing fieldwork in face of travel and in-person activity restrictions. Ultimately, I decided to focus on how immigrant-rights organizations supported Bolivian immigrants in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to identify the main issues faced by the community. I conducted key-informant interviews and archival work on websites and social media of three São Paulo-based organizations: (i) the Centro de Apoio ao Migrante (Migrant Support Center), which supports immigrants with legal orientation, Portuguese lessons, and community events; (ii) the Asociación de Mujeres Inmigrantes Luz y Vida (Immigrant Women Association Light and Life), a grassroots organization founded by Bolivian women; and (iii) the Alinha Institute, an NGO focused on improving labor, safety, and health conditions in the garment industry. Data collection took place in August and September 2021 and was funded by the Dr. Lisa Sable Brown Endowed Fund for Human Rights from the Center for Human Rights at the University of Washington.

Through my fieldwork, I identified three more visible areas of impact among the Bolivian community in São Paulo that organizations were able to intervene in: labor conditions, food and housing, and border control. Given quarantine and social distancing, private and intimate issues – such as domestic violence, vaccine hesitancy, and Covid-19 after-effects – only came to the surface when restrictions were loosened.

Labor conditions

The most immediate consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic for Bolivian sweatshop workers in São Paulo was the sudden halt on garment industry production. As a consequence, most sweatshops were out of work within the first month of lockdown policies. Given that wages are based on productivity, workers lost their income. Nonetheless, in these first few months of the pandemic, several Bolivian-owned sweatshops were recruited to sew cloth face masks and hospital gowns. Because they had been struggling to make ends meet, however, many sweatshops accepted highly exploitative deals, with pay ranging from \$0.10BRL to \$0.02BRL (roughly \$0.02USD to 0.004USD) per mask sewn. Both the Migrant Support Center and the Alinha Institute shifted their approach and negotiated sewing deals in the name of the sweatshops they previously attended, getting clients to pay around \$3.50BRL per mask sewn (roughly \$0.70USD).

Food and housing

As sweatshops lost most or all of their income, owners were not able to afford food and rent for themselves, their families, and their workers. All three organizations made significant efforts to distribute *cestas básicas*, a food parcel that includes local diet staples (rice, beans, oil, coffee, flour, among others) and hygiene products, to as many families as possible. These donations were vital in sustaining Bolivian families throughout the first months of the pandemic, when they were mostly out of work. Additionally, due to this lack of income, many families were unable to make rent and were evicted, losing not only their home but also their place of work and means of production, since many could not keep their sewing machines.

Border control

As conditions got increasingly worse for Bolivian immigrants residing in the São Paulo area, many decided to return to Bolivia, hoping to find a better situation in their home country. The first hurdle was crossing the border in order to enter Bolivia: since borders were closed, many returning migrants resorted to coyotes to get them across, using money earned by selling furniture and sewing machines. Upon arriving in Bolivia, many families did not find the conditions they were hoping for, and decided to return to Brazil. Migrants then had to take on a second border-crossing journey to re-enter the country, again through the hands of coyotes. Although Brazilian migration law policies do not include detention and deportation, new laws passed during the Covid-19 period made border crossing a “sanitary crime,” demanding undocumented migrants to pay extremely high fees if caught by the police or attempting to regularize their migration status. Additionally, restrictions to documentation and visa services also made it harder for incoming migrants to become documented. Ultimately, this increase in indocumentation among Bolivian immigrants in the São Paulo area increased conditions of vulnerability and labor precarization.



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Above: Migrant Support Center staff distribute *cestas básicas* and facilitate documentation procedures (2021).

Below: sweatshop workers show the *cestas básicas* received from the Immigrant Women Association (2021).