



Global South Conversations on COVID-19 and housing struggles

Intensification of, and responses to, housing struggles in Brazil under the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted historically vulnerable populations in Brazil such as the unhoused and those living in tenements and quilombolas, and in particular black, brown and indigenous peoples. This has intensified issues of unemployment, indebtedness, precarious work and hunger among Brazilians who already faced various forms of violence. Yet important efforts have emerged to confront these conditions, such as the Zero Evictions Campaign launched in July 2020 by social movements and national entities with international support. It has demanded the suspension of any activity or violation of rights, even if supported by a judicial or administrative decision, that aim to evacuate families and communities.

Keywords

Brazil, COVID-19, Zero Evictions Campaign

RHJ: Acknowledging that current struggles are part of a continuum, how has COVID-19 further impacted housing struggles and the struggle for inhabitation in Brazil (e.g. foreclosures, evictions...)?

Maria Carolina: Several studies have pointed out the disparity in the impact of the pandemic, affecting some groups in a severe and perverse way.¹ The populations that are historically most socially vulnerable are also those at imminent risk in times of catastrophes and crisis. This includes residents of slums and tenements, *quilombolas*, black, brown and indigenous people, riverside dwellers and the unhoused. According to recent research from the Center for Health Operations and Intelligence at University PUC-Rio, black Brazilians have died from COVID at a disproportionate rate when compared to the white Brazilian population.² Thus, the dissemination and consequences of COVID-19 are necessarily associated with the condition of marginality to which a large part of the population is subjected, especially those who inhabit poor territories, and who already survive under various forms of violence. The social effects of the pandemic have become evident in slums, tenements, clandestine subdivisions and low-income neighborhoods, such as the intensification of unemployment, indebtedness, precarious work and hunger. Due to this, I believe that one of the most relevant actions to confront housing struggles in Brazil has been the Zero Evictions Campaign, launched on 23 July 2020. This is a national action organized by social movements and national entities with international support. It aims to suspend any activity or violation of rights, even if supported by a judicial or administrative decision, that aim to evacuate families and communities both in rural areas and in the city. It is a campaign that has been built openly and collectively by the whole of society, and its articulation is permanent.

RHJ: Could you elaborate as to what do you mean by permanent? Are you optimistic that these efforts will carry on after the pandemic?

Maria Carolina: In the face of the permanent violation of the right to housing in Brazil, expressed by the large number of evictions even during the pandemic, the objective of the campaign is the systematic monitoring of housing rights violations that continue even in the so-called post-pandemic period. For this, I believe that it is essential to seek the population's awareness on these injustices and denaturalizing inequality. When living is a privilege, occupying is a right. I believe that it is essential that academics assume their political role, both in research and in teaching. It is central to understand the role of the university outside its technical-scientific walls. It is necessary to be able to reach society, engage with them, and translate scholarly knowledge. But above all, it is imperative to bring the knowledge of those who are at the forefront of housing struggles into the university through, for instance, courses that elevate such exchange and expansion of knowledge. I am offering a course on social movements that centers on the role of women in the struggles for the right to housing. To this end, I invited women living in occupations throughout Brazil to teach us about their lived experience.

¹ See Demenech, L., Dumith, S., Vieira, M., & Neiva-Silva, L. (2020) Desigualdade econômica e risco de infecção e morte por COVID-19 no Brasil, *Revista Brasileira de Epidemiologia*, 23, e200095 and Rocha, R., Atun, R., Massuda, A., Rache, B., Spinola, P., Nunes, L., Lago, M. & Castro, M. (2021) Effect of socioeconomic inequalities and vulnerabilities on health-system preparedness and response to COVID-19 in Brazil: a comprehensive analysis. *Lancet Glob Health*.

² <https://www.ctc.puc-rio.br/diferencas-sociais-confirmam-que-pretos-e-pardos-morrem-mais-de-covid-19-do-que-brancos-segundo-nt11-do-nois/>

RHJ: Has COVID-19 exacerbated existing structural systems of oppression, racism, sexism, among others, particularly in relation to the intensification of traumatic experiences which have historically affected women of color and black women in particular? How has this impacted housing struggles?

Maria Carolina: The intersections between gender, race and class, added to the geographical distribution of poverty and inequality, and housing conditions, reveal a deepening of the vulnerability to which most women are already subjected in Brazil. Women are at the forefront of care for those infected with COVID-19. According to a survey done in 2013 by the Federal Nursing Council (COFEN) in partnership with the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), 85 percent of nurses are women in the country. Women are also more affected by unpaid work, especially in times of crisis because they are primarily responsible for care activities and household chores. In addition, women are overrepresented in economically vulnerable activities. According to the IBGE's Summary of Social Indicators (2018), 46.9 percent of the black and brown population are also employed informally. Therefore, we can assume that the group most vulnerable to the pandemic is the black community, especially women. The situation of single mothers is even more critical, they often have lower incomes and live, in general, in the outskirts of Brazilian cities. In most cases, single mothers move polygonally through the city and mainly by public transportation or by foot in order to reach their support networks, increasing their exposure to the virus. In other words, women travel with more stops and different destinations, while men (in the same economic and racial conditions) tend to make long trips more linearly, with the same origin and destination (home to work). This is because women accumulate the multiple functions (usually unpaid) of domestic care and support for others, which fall even more heavily on poor, black women living in periurban areas of Brazil. On top of which, women have been affected by the rise of domestic violence during the pandemic.

RHJ: Are there any more data or information that you could share about the rise of domestic violence during the pandemic in Brazil?

Maria Carolina: According to the Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security 2020, released in October 2020, between January and March, the beginning of the quarantine, there was an increase of almost four percent in calls to 190 about domestic violence cases, representing a total of 147,379 calls. There was also a recorded two percent increase in femicides compared to the same period last year, that is, Brazil registered 649 femicides during the first half of 2020. Yet the report notes that these numbers do not reflect reality because of the difficulty of making a complaint during isolation; before the pandemic, women would often file complaints when the perpetrator of the violence was out at work. According to the 'Justiceiras' project (similar to vigilantes),³ created a year ago to welcome women victims of domestic violence, 35 percent of the assisted women live with the suspected aggressor; in 51 percent of cases, the abuser is the current partner and in 48

³ <https://justiceiras.org.br/>

percent, an ex-boyfriend or husband. The project registered approximately 4,500 calls throughout the country last year.

RHJ: COVID-19 and its management has intensified traumatic experiences of loss and dispossession. Has this created new and interrelated forms, spaces, and opportunities for state—and other types of —repression and violence? Can you reflect on this in relation to the Brazilian context?

Maria Carolina: At the beginning of the pandemic, many studies pointed directly to slums and precarious areas as the main disseminators of the coronavirus. In these areas, health recommendations are practically impossible to follow due to precarious inhabitation conditions: staying at home when you do not have one, maintaining social distance when there is overcrowding, and complying with hygiene protocols when some households do not even have a bathroom inside their homes (in some cases, one bathroom is shared by up to 50 families). Paradoxically, at the end of June 2020, the Federal Senate approved the new Legal Framework for Basic Sanitation, further expanding the commercialization of this service in Brazil. The text of the law was not discussed with social movements or with the public. Privatization, before the new legislation, had already begun, but now it is mandatory. This means that people who cannot pay for the service will be left completely without assistance, such as homeless people. The pandemic, however, has made it clear that without good sanitation conditions for everyone, everyone is at risk.

RHJ: Are there any geographies (e.g. particular cities or areas within cities) that are particularly vulnerable to this in Brazil?

Maria Carolina: In Brazil, there is not a watertight division between center and periphery because of the ubiquity of precarious conditions and poverty, although wealth (and labor market) concentration at the center is supported by the exploitation of the periphery. Inequality is a constitutive condition of Brazilian cities, especially large ones, but one can speak of intertwined inequalities. In Brazil we consider territories with low conditions of habitability and security as periphery, a concept that moves beyond geography.

RHJ: How have people, established movements, and new forms of organizing/mobilizing/activism (e.g. collective ownership, mapping, crowdfunding...) responded (and where within Brazil)? Have public policies responded to such civic/public input? What have been some of the struggles/tensions?

Maria Carolina: Brazilian public policies have been inefficient in combatting the effects of the current sanitary, social, economic and political crisis. Yet there have been successful experiences in facing the pandemic arising from civil society and communities, which have spread across the country. I would like to highlight an initiative with which I was involved. Early in the pandemic in Brazil, in March 2020, I joined four other colleagues (Alexandre Pedrozo, Kelly Vasco, Mônica Máximo and, later, Simone Polli) to develop the platform *Paraná Contra a Covid-19*. [PrContraCovid](#), an initiative of professionals and students of urban planning, economics, sociology, geography and social work, that sought to gather, produce and analyze territorialized data and information for monitoring and facing the pandemic in Paraná. The platform gathers data to produce maps on cases of

the disease and the most vulnerable areas in the city of Curitiba, among others, such as Maringá e Paranavaí, as well as technical notes and booklets on the topic. Our goal has been to gather and to produce territorialized data that analyze the impacts of the pandemic on the various social segments, especially pointing out the omissions of public policies and the effects on the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable populations. The platform also connects—through a map—people who want to donate food, clothing or hygiene material, and people who are most in need. There are currently more than 40 researchers and students engaging in the platform, producing open and free scientific content for many cities in Paraná. In 2020, we won the FNA Award, granted annually by the National Federation of Architects and Urban Planners (FNA), for initiatives that highlight the social function of the profession.

RHJ: Thinking post-COVID-19: how might the urban/housing question look like a year from now? What will housing justice organizing look like?

Maria Carolina: Without a doubt, we are already experiencing a deepening of inequalities with an increase in poverty, which puts us on a bitter horizon. I believe that the pandemic has made clear the important role of the State and public policies. So I really believe that it is important to fight against and for the State/public policies, simultaneously, filling gaps where action and resistance is necessary. In this sense, it is essential to fight for emergency plans that address housing struggles (such as containing evictions and supporting unhoused populations), health, social assistance, economic hardship, education, universal sanitation, among other considerations, in an integrated way. What we have seen during the pandemic in Brazil are emergency plans centered on the healthcare system without regard to other interrelated matters, such as housing. It is also important to seek mechanisms, tools and models that can guide the implementation of emergency solutions into long-term plans that aid populations who have historically lived at the edge of the abyss, such as favela residents who live in hills that suffer landslides every rainy season, residents of areas close to dams and mining areas, and homeless people, among others. I am talking about innovative governance models that allow greater flexibility and agile additions to promote cooperation between civil society, public authorities and institutions. Communities of vulnerable territories have been producing emergency solutions for almost a century, we need to look at them and start from there.

RHJ: You raise many interesting points. Could you elaborate on your idea of working both against and for the state? How might/has that look(ed) under Bolsonaro's current regime?

Maria Carolina: I have seen that Brazilian social movements, which have been strong for a long time, already have a keen perception of how they should relate to the State. They teach us the real meaning of what it is to dispute the State. There are times when disputing is confronting the state machine or certain public policies, there are others in which it is necessary to seek forms of collaboration, and there are still others in which it is necessary to pressure the State based on local practices—social techniques developed by movements in their daily survival. In that sense, what social movements teach us is that it is necessary to fight against, with and also beyond the State, seeking to overcome current systems of oppression through, for instance, coalition building, as well as different ways

of thinking and acting in the city. This knowledge based on reality is very inspiring, but one cannot forget that it is built on a lot of pain and suffering. The struggle for housing and for the right to the city has put theorized and practiced perceptions in friction.

RHJ: Do you have any comparative reflections between Brazil and other countries (e.g. on militarization, authoritarianism, electoral contexts, prospects to advance housing justice etc.)? Will this global struggle foster new international solidarities?

Maria Carolina: In Brazil, the articulation of social movements aimed at preserving the life and housing of vulnerable people during the pandemic, linked to the important work of the Public Defender's Office and the monitoring of many researchers from Brazilian universities, managed to pass laws that suspended eviction during the pandemic period. This includes both evictions in urban and rural areas, as well as those resulting from abusive increases in rents. The United Nations special rapporteur on the right to housing also recommended that Brazil suspend all types of evictions, recognizing them as human rights violations. Similar measures have been adopted in other countries in the world, such as New York City's recommendations for tenants affected by COVID-19,⁴ the UK's guidance for landlords and tenants (which banned evictions at specific times),⁵ and France's Emergency Packages in Response to COVID-19.⁶ Similar measures were also adopted by several Latin American countries, such as Argentina,⁷ Bolivia,⁸ Colombia⁹ and Venezuela.¹⁰ In the opposite direction, however, President Jair Bolsonaro vetoed, in June 2020, a bill that prohibited eviction during the pandemic and which had even been approved by the National Congress. The Zero Evictions Campaign has thus given international visibility to the violations of law in Brazil. Although evictions did not stop completely, the campaign was able to block or delay some through this international visibility and the network of actors among popular lawyers, public defenders, militants of housing movements and activists. In this sense, the maintenance of this articulation through the permanence of the campaign post-Covid19 is central to the work. And victories must be celebrated! Among the most recent is the approval, on 23 February 2021, of the resolution in which the National Council of Justice recommended avoiding evictions and collective removals during the pandemic. Approximately 64,000 families in vulnerable situations are expected to benefit. The request complies with the demands of the movement of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) and other social movements articulated through the Zero Evictions Campaign.

RHJ: There are some parallels between the efforts undertaken by the Zero Evictions Campaign and pre-COVID efforts in Mexico after subprime lending led numerous

⁴ <https://www1.nyc.gov/content/tenantprotection/pages/covid19-home-quarantine>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-and-renting-guidance-for-landlords-tenants-and-local-authorities/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-landlords-and-tenants>

⁶ https://www.goodwinlaw.com/publications/2020/03/03_31-measures-to-support-the-french-economy

⁷ <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/economia/medidas-economicas-COVID19/alquileres>

⁸ <https://bolivia.infoleyes.com/articulo/100407>

⁹ <https://dapre.presidencia.gov.co/normativa/normativa/DECRETO%20579%20DEL%2015%20DE%20ABRIL%20DE%202020.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://elestimulo.com/maduro-suspende-desalojos-por-todo-2020-que-pasara-con-el-pago-de-alquileres/>

households to face the prospects of foreclosure and eviction. Yet efforts were localized, largely concentrated in a few large Mexican cities, and faced very significant struggles, such as the imprisonment of housing activists. What do you think has allowed housing movements in Brazil to more effectively coalesce and take their demands to the national/federal level? Can you also think of other parallel Global South or Latin American mobilizing efforts?

Maria Carolina: First, it is necessary to understand that the movements of struggle for housing in Brazil have a long history of fighting and facing oppression. Brazil is a country built on intense inequality and social injustice, but it is also a country of great social mobilization and solidarity. The context of the elaboration of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution was a significant moment of coalition of progressive forces whose decisive pressure ensured the approval of a Constitution with a democratic content, despite some limitations. The text has its own chapter for Urban Policy (arts. 182 and 183) that includes the social function of property and the right to housing, which culminates in the City Statute, known worldwide. We also had significant advances and achievements during the Lula and Dilma governments over 13 years. However, despite the law, the country still lives in a great abyss, which has deepened further with the current administration. Thus I find it difficult to make any comparisons with mobilizations in other countries; the capitalist context of each country and their systems of oppression and domination have been built historically. Such fabrics of oppression and the revolutionary fabrics that make coalition building possible changes in each place in a unique way. What is important to say is that, despite advanced legislation, significant changes have always been achieved due to intense social mobilization. There is no room for abandonment or refusal of any field of struggle—whether legislative, in direct action, or in the epistemological field—because the survival of many depends on it. ‘Whoever does not fight is dead’, already says the cry of the inhabitants of São Paulo's occupations.

RHJ: Any closing thoughts?

Maria Carolina: Despite the gains, we have still witnessed the repeated practice of administrative removals of workers from their homes, promoted by City Halls and local authorities without a judicial decision or the right to ample defense, and with the use of violence. According to the systematization of the Zero Evictions Campaign, at least 6,373 families were evicted during the pandemic in Brazil. And according to the Anti-Evictions Observatory from USP, Unifesp and UFABC universities, about 2,430 families were affected by evictions in 2020 just in the city of São Paulo, twice as many as those seen in 2019. In general, territories with populations of vulnerability have historically been compelled to invent survival strategies and to produce associative life forms. They discover and create common resources through expansive circuits of non-market economic activities. However, the increase in unemployment and the consequent impoverishment of the population—a result of the pandemic—has reduced donations to solidarity networks and the response capacity of vulnerable communities in their territories. Popular actions reveal the urgency to review the origin of urban problems, especially in the field of public policy assessment and monitoring. In this field, it has been

common to punish those who propose solutions in the face of complete state insufficiency, as housing occupations have done historically. It is still very important to fight for fair responses from the State and from public assistance policies.

Participants

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