

Migration and Modern Slavery: New Challenges in the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil

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Official cases of slave-like work conditions in Brazil have a close relationship with the social vulnerability of workers, many of whom move from poor regions in the country in pursuit of any job opportunity, formal or not, that can guarantee family support.

A similar flow occurs from neighbouring countries to Brazil, where Latin American migrants look to the Brazilian economy for better working and living conditions. Unfortunately, they often face exploitation in conditions analogous to slavery and human trafficking.



Labour inspector and Spanish interpreter guide Venezuelan migrants around a sawmill in Roraima, Brazil (2019). Photo: Instagram [@trabalhoescravo](https://www.instagram.com/trabalhoescravo).

According to the [Undersecretariat for Labour Inspection](#) (SIT), since 2006, 880 international migrants have been removed from slave-like conditions in Brazil. Forty-one migrants were removed in 2020. The largest proportion by nationality is Bolivians (46 per cent), followed by Paraguayans (21 per cent) and Haitians (16 per cent).

Cases involving the submission of migrants to modern slavery since 2006 have been reported in 42 cities in the country. The biggest city in Brazil, São Paulo, leads the number of cases of exploitation (43 per cent of the total victims), and the majority of victims rescued were found in



urban activities (79 per cent). In 2020, just over half of migrants rescued were working in rural activities.



Labour inspector during inspection of sewing workshop in São Paulo, Brazil (2020). Photo: Sérgio Carvalho.

Labour Inspection and COVID-19

Brazil has been a global leader in combating slave-like work conditions, since the creation of the Special Mobile Inspection Group in 1995, which is coordinated by the Labour Inspectorate, with the participation of the Prosecution Service, the Federal Police, the Federal Highway Police and the Public Defender's Office. This model of inter-institutional action guarantees a comprehensive approach to addressing cases of slave labour, from the restitution of the victims' labour rights in the administrative scope of the Labour Inspection to the initiation of criminal proceedings against employers.

This Brazilian good practice celebrated its 25th anniversary in a year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite all the restrictions, the Labour Inspectorate did not halt its operations, because, needless to say, human rights violations also did not take time off during the pandemic. In 2020, fifteen Paraguayans, ten Peruvians, eight Venezuelans, five Bolivians, two Chinese and one Filipino domestic worker were rescued from modern slavery, in addition to more than 800 Brazilian workers. The number of victims rescued in the pandemic year was



close to the average of the last four years, which demonstrates that there was no lockdown for modern slavery and human trafficking.



*Labour inspector during inspection of the carnauba wax supply chain in Ceará, Brazil (2020).
Foto: Instagram [@trabalhoescravo](#).*

Since the fight against modern slavery began in Brazil, more than 55 thousand workers have been rescued from slave labour and more than 108 million Brazilian real (R\$)* have been received by workers as wages and severance payments during inspection and rescue operations. The consolidated and detailed data of all inspections to combat slave labour since 1995 are available on the SIT [Slave Labour Radar website](#).





Radar SIT

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- Página Inicial
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Trabalho Escravo

Trabalhador Escravo:

Todas as Fiscalizações

Selecione a Situação:

Todas as Situações

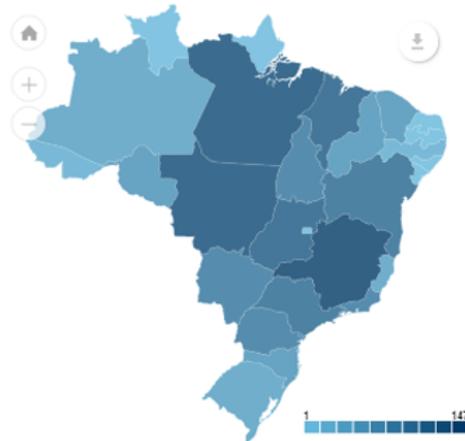
Selecione o Ano:

Todos os Anos

Trabalho Escravo

- Trabalho Escravo - Tráfico de Pessoas
- Trabalho Infantil

Fiscalizações de Trabalho Escravo em Todos os Anos



Trabalhadores em Condições Análogas à de Escravo Encontrados Pela Inspeção do Trabalho

55.013

In the case of undocumented migrants, the situation is even more sensitive, as workers are often afraid to complain about working conditions because they fear being penalized with deportation. Experts from the International Labour Organization (ILO) advise that Convention 81, to which Brazil is signatory, does not contain any provision that excludes undocumented migrants from the protection provided by the Labour Inspectorate. Therefore, if the Labour Inspectorate’s relationship of trust with workers is broken and the protection of fundamental rights is not upheld, cases of exploitation of undocumented migrants will continue to occur.



The Brazilian Migration Law guarantees the fulfillment of legal and contractual labour obligations and the application of rules for the protection of workers without discrimination based on nationality or immigration status. In this consolidated legal context, Labour Inspection is responsible for guaranteeing labour rights to migrants of any origin.

The Vulnerability of Migrant Workers

In *Slave labour, evictions and masks at R\$ 0.10*: a pandemic worsens the situation of Bolivian migrants*, Thais Lazzeri and Ana Magalhães outline a real case of human trafficking and slave labour that took place in the midst of the pandemic. Two sisters were recruited in Bolivia to work in a sewing workshop in São Paulo, where they were subjected to forced labour, degrading working conditions and exhausting working hours.

The immigration status of the two sisters was the reason why they did not seek help after realizing that the promises made by the human trafficker in Bolivia were false and that they were being denied their basic human rights. In addition, as a compounding factor in this condition of vulnerability, in mid-July in Brazil, the pandemic was advancing quickly, requiring lockdown of non-essential services and social isolation. These restrictions were also used against the sisters by the employer, so that they would not leave the sewing workshop, which served as both their place of work and residence.

Fortunately, the two sisters were rescued by labour inspectors, which allowed for the restitution of their labour rights, as well as access to special unemployment insurance and social care, at a time when many Brazilians who had their employment affected were in need of financial support, such as that offered by the federal government due to the suspension of several economic activities. Their desired return to Bolivia was also accompanied. From their moment of rescue to their return to their country of origin, good communication between the federal government and civil society, namely the Labour Inspectorate and the Center for Support and Pastoral Care of Migrants (CAMI), which was responsible for providing social assistance to the rescued sisters—was extremely important.

According to [Natália Maciel](#), who is Project Coordinator for the Human Trafficking Unit at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Brazil, the protection of migrants is even more urgent in the current pandemic period. She notes, “There is an even greater need to protect the rights of migrants. In 2020, when we saw the impacts of this unprecedented pandemic on human mobility and the increase in vulnerabilities and the exploitation of people, that attention becomes even more urgent”.

The Brazilian Migration Law also provides for residence permits for victims of human trafficking, slave labour or violations of rights aggravated by their immigration status. In such cases, the request can be forwarded to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security by the Labour Inspectorate, thus ensuring that the migrant remains in the country, if they so desire.



The Ipê System

In 2020, the Labour Inspectorate and the ILO launched a new platform for receiving complaints of slave-like work conditions, called the [Ipê System](#). Anyone with access to the internet can report a case of modern slavery safely and anonymously through the [Ipê System](#).



On 2 December 2020, the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, an [event titled “1 Jornada Ipê”](#) was held, which brought together about 500 people engaged in the eradication of slave-like work in Brazil to learn about the new tool and its capabilities. In 2021, a module of the Ipê System is scheduled to be launched in Spanish, French and English, so that it can become more accessible to migrants.

The biggest challenge for the Labour Inspectorate this year and the following years is to eradicate modern-day slavery and to guarantee the right to decent work for all, regardless of their place of origin, in order to achieve Targets 8.7 and 8.8 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

*(R\$ 1 = USD 0.18)

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