

## Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19: Refugee Experiences in Brazil

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Résumé de l'article

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# Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19: Refugee Experiences in Brazil

Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli

## ABSTRACT

Refugees have adopted solidarity actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, even after being left behind during health emergencies. This article contributes to the literature on solidarity and asylum by discussing refugees' solidarity narratives towards vulnerable Brazilian groups, the refugee community, and the Brazilian population in general. The author conducted 29 in-depth semi-structured interviews with refugees living in Brazil between March 27 and April 6, 2020. Refugees' past suffering experiences make them more empathic to other people's suffering due to the pandemic, which creates an inclusive victim consciousness that seems to explain their solidarity narratives towards different groups.

## KEYWORDS

refugees; Brazil; solidarity; COVID-19

## RESUMÉ

Les réfugiés adoptent des actions de solidarité pendant la pandémie de COVID-19, même en étant laissés derrière en situation d'urgence sanitaire. Cet article contribue à la littérature sur la solidarité et l'asile en abordant les récits de solidarité des réfugiés envers les groupes vulnérables du Brésil, la communauté des réfugiés et la population brésilienne en général. J'ai mené 29 entrevues approfondies semi-structurées avec des réfugiés vivant au Brésil entre le 27 mars et le 6 avril 2020. Les expériences de souffrance passées des réfugiés les rendent plus empathiques envers la souffrance vécue par d'autres en raison de la pandémie, ce qui crée une conscience de victime inclusive (Vollhardt, 2015) qui semble expliquer leurs récits de solidarité envers différents groupes.

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## INTRODUCTION


In April 2020, Brazilian newspapers shared the story of Talal, a Syrian refugee distributing food during the lockdown in the city of São Paulo. Talal came to Brazil with his family fleeing the war in Syria in 2013. After arriv-

ing in São Paulo, where he had his refugee status declared by the Brazilian government according to national and international law, he could not continue working as an engineer. Then, Talal's family started to sell Syrian food, and the money they made from this became their only source of income. With

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the outbreak of COVID-19 in Brazil, Talal's family's business was deeply affected by cancelled fairs, events, and parties they would have catered. The city of São Paulo initially adopted the World Health Organization (WHO)-recommended measures of closing all non-essential businesses and enforcing social distancing. However, instead of just staying at home, since his business was closed, Talal started to deliver one thousand meals to elderly people and homeless people in São Paulo. Talal and his family decided to "give back" to Brazil. He explained,

I stayed in Syria during the war, and I know what happens when a person needs to stay at home because of the war, the bombs. It is very difficult. During the quarantine in Brazil, I thought about doing something for the elderly.

*(Cavicholi, 2020, para. 3)*

This article focuses on such narratives of solidarity by refugees, an excluded group, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Martuscelli, 2021), considering refugees' motivations and interpretations of their own actions. **Refugees** are understood here as people forcibly displaced from their countries due to a fear of persecution because of their race, nationality, religion, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, or because of a situation of a grave and generalized violation of human rights. The WHO formally declared the pandemic on March 11, 2020, given the severity and extent of the new coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Practically all human beings on the globe were directly or indirectly affected by this disease or the measures to fight it, including more than 239 million people infected and

4,871,841 people killed as of October 15, 2021 (WHO, 2021).

Refugees tend to be among those excluded during health emergencies (Raju & Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020; Ventura, 2015), and many experts have reflected on the negative consequences of this pandemic towards this population (especially for those in camps and detention centres) (Hargreaves et al., 2020; Keller & Wagner, 2020; Kluge et al., 2020; Riggiozzi et al., 2020; Vince, 2020). At the same time, refugees on practically every continent have responded to the pandemic with solidarity (ACNUR, 2020; Bentley et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020; United Nations Regional Information Centre [UNRIC], 2020). This article focuses on Brazil, which registered the third-highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world on October 15, 2021 (21,590,097) and the second-highest number of deaths (601,398) (WHO, 2021). I reflect on the solidarity narratives of 29 refugees living through the first two weeks of the pandemic in Brazil in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro,<sup>1</sup> where the governors adopted WHO-recommended measures to avoid the spread of the virus (Martuscelli, 2021).

Like Talal's story, refugees' experiences of suffering in their origin countries allowed them to relate to other people's suffering during the pandemic, which motivates different solidarity narratives towards Brazilians in general and other vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, homeless people, the poor, and refugees living in occupations. The analytical framework employed to investigate refugees' solidarity narratives is inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015). This article also draws on the typology developed by Bauder and Juffs (2020) to analyze

<sup>1</sup>In the pandemic outbreak, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro were initially the two states in Brazil with the most infected people and deaths in consequence of COVID-19. However, other states also adopted the WHO-recommended measures to deal with COVID-19. For a detailed analysis, see Jubilut et al. (2020).

the different types of solidarity in refugee studies.

This inclusive victim consciousness approach (Vollhardt, 2015) helps us to understand the logics that motivate the solidarity of refugees during the COVID-19 crisis in different parts of the world. The Brazilian case illustrates this mechanism considering the living experiences of refugees in Brazil and how they faced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country (narratives of refugees). The next section discusses the solidarity experiences of refugees since the beginning of the pandemic. Following, the “Theoretical Framework” section explains the inclusive victim consciousness approach (Vollhardt, 2015) and the different types of solidarity (Bauder & Juffs, 2020) in the narratives of refugees. A brief contextual section presents information on the situation of refugees living in Brazil during the COVID-19 outbreak. The “Methodology” section describes the choices of data collection and analysis. It is followed by the “Results” section, which presents indications of inclusive victim consciousness in refugees’ narratives and the different types of solidarity of refugees towards vulnerable groups, other refugees, and the Brazilian population in general. Finally, the conclusion highlights how the Brazilian case could be useful to understand other solidarity expressions of refugees in times of the pandemic in the world.

### Solidary Experiences of Refugees During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Refugees have contributed to the fight against COVID-19 in their host countries (Mcdonald-Gibson, 2020). They have volunteered for social activities, such as disinfecting public places, providing meals for essential workers, and sewing masks, as a

way of giving back to their host communities (Lindsay, 2020). Somali refugees provided masks, alcohol gel, and food baskets to people living in informal camps in South Africa. They aimed to support people excluded from the government’s emergency aid, such as asylum seekers, refugees with expired documents, undocumented migrants, and homeless people. Somali refugees explained that their decision to support this community was because they knew how it is to be hungry (ACNUR, 2020). In the United Kingdom, refugees delivered emergency food packages to vulnerable asylum seekers. One of these volunteers explained, “I think it is my responsibility to stand in solidarity and help the people in my community who are in need in this challenging time. Being an asylum seeker myself, it is vital we don’t forget society’s most vulnerable” (UNRIC, 2020, para. 7). In the Netherlands, asylum seekers were taking part in different activities to protect the locals from the coronavirus, for example, cleaning train stations, shopping trolleys, and baskets. When asked why they were doing this, one asylum seeker said, “We have a roof over our heads and food here. I think it’s time for us to get involved to fight the coronavirus. We want to give something back” (UNRIC, 2020, para. 8). The United Nations reflected:

Refugees and asylum seekers are among some of the most vulnerable members of our societies, exposed to many of the huge risks presented by the virus. In light of this, the significant contribution of refugees and asylum seekers, either as medical staff in hospitals or as generous citizens in our communities, is all the more meaningful and must be acknowledged.

(UNRIC, 2020, para. 9)

Refugees have also been making a difference in their own communities in the fight against COVID-19. Hakiza et al. (2020) recognize their importance in the responses to

the pandemic. Refugees distribute food and non-food items, provide information, serve the community as health workers, participate in contagion monitoring and screening initiatives, and influence behavioural norms. Refugee women have offered solutions to protect their communities from the virus in Bangladesh, Ukraine, Jordan, and Kenya (UN Women, 2020). Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2020) reflect on the “long-standing traditions of mutual aid and solidarity” of refugees in Lebanon “to protect themselves and others from the pandemic” (p. 351). The authors explain that these initiatives existed even before the COVID-19 outbreak, and the refugees would provide support to different nationalities within and outside refugee camps. Bentley et al. (2020) show that Somali communities in the United States mobilized and prioritized support for elders, individuals with chronic health conditions, and people with low socio-economic backgrounds (including providing them with food) during the pandemic. According to one Somali refugee, “What gives me strength or meaning at this time is giving back to my community” (Bentley et al., 2020, p. S262).

In Brazil, refugees and other migrants started sewing masks to donate to public shelters and low-income populations in a project in partnership with the Public Ministry of Labour (MPT) and the University of Campinas (Unicamp) and supported by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The collective movement Deslocamento Criativo was coordinating this action with refugees and other migrants. A Syrian refugee involved in the project reflected: “I think it is important to contribute at this moment to ensure the well-being of refugees and migrants living in public shelters, without having the possibility of getting a job” (Pachioni, 2020, para 8).

Delfim (2020a) highlights that since mid-March 2020, at least 50 actions—especially in the state of São Paulo—were carried out by or had the active participation of migrants. The migrant-led organization *África do Coração* distributed hundreds of food packages to refugees and other migrants in different states of Brazil (Delfim, 2020b). Refugee led-organizations provide answers in five areas in the context of COVID-19: (a) ensuring public information, (b) acting as community health workers, (c) assisting in the screening and monitoring of contagions, (d) filling gaps in the provision of services and policies, and (e) influencing social norms (Alio et al., 2020; Betts et al., 2020).

All cases presented in this section show diverse solidarity acts performed by refugees in different contexts and parts of the globe, even if they tend to be a group left behind during sanitary emergencies. However, it is not clear what motivates refugees to be solidary during the pandemic. By analyzing the case of Brazil, this paper shows that refugees, despite their exclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic, feel empathy towards vulnerable groups’ suffering in their host countries and adopt solidarity narratives regarding them.

### Theoretical Framework

Wilde (2013, p. 1) defines **solidarity** as “a feeling of sympathy shared by subjects within and between groups, impelling supportive action and pursuing social inclusion.” Solidarity among people is essential in the fight against COVID-19 through the adoption of measures that prevent the spread of the virus, such as staying at home, maintaining social distance, and wearing a mask to protect oneself and others (Libal & Kashwan, 2020).

There were many experiences of solidarity acts during the COVID-19 pandemic out-

break (beyond adopting the recommended protection measures), including communities going shopping for the elderly, individuals volunteering, and other manifestations of love and empathy being shown towards neighbours. A shared sense of vulnerability during a crisis can spur solidarity. [Elcheroth and Drury \(2020\)](#) explain that “the feeling of all being ‘in the same boat’ gives rise to a sense of common identity, which motivates and makes possible mutual support during the crisis” (p. 707). However, it is not expected that solidarity will automatically develop during a moment of crisis ([Prainsack, 2020](#)), mainly because, following their survival instincts, people may adopt selfish actions.

Refugees’ solidarity towards other groups can be explained by “perceived similarities between the ingroup’s and other groups’ experiences of group-based victimization” ([Vollhardt et al., 2016](#), p. 354). [Vollhardt et al. \(2016\)](#) argue that two types of consciousness can happen between two groups. The first happens when a group perceives another group as a symbolic threat when there is conflict over resources. In this case, the first group will perceive its victimization as unique and distinct, forming an exclusive victim consciousness towards the second group. This group will not be solidary (or adopt positive attitudes) towards the group perceived as competing for the same resources ([Vollhardt, 2015](#)).

On the other hand, “shared experiences of disadvantage, group-based oppression or violence can provide the basis for a common ingroup between victimized groups” ([Vollhardt et al., 2016](#), p. 355), creating an inclusive victim consciousness. [Vollhardt \(2015\)](#) explains that having contact with other groups’ narratives of suffering may motivate this inclusive victim consciousness in the first

group. However, there is no direct expectation of solidarity a priori because “this mutual acknowledgement of suffering and collective victimization,” as the essence of inclusive victim consciousness, must be “thorough and genuine” ([Vollhardt, 2015](#), p. 115).

[Vollhardt et al. \(2016\)](#) show that this inclusive victim consciousness can extend beyond a specific context when a mutual acknowledgement is present and the other group is not perceived as a competitor. The authors conclude that “general inclusive victim consciousness (i.e., believing that other groups in the world have suffered in similar ways as the ingroup) predicted support for refugees and immigrants among disadvantaged and victimized minority groups” (p. 365). This article considers refugees in Brazil as having an in-group identity as people who suffered victimizing events that forced them to apply for asylum in Brazil. In this context, the term **victims** denotes that refugees suffered events that forced them to flee their countries. However, being victims does not mean that refugees are helpless people who cannot act. On the contrary, victimizing experiences motivate groups to act towards other groups. I employ the victim terminology of [Vollhardt \(2015\)](#), but I recognize the importance of critical discussions on victimhood. In this article, I understand **victim** “not as a passive synonym of victimization but as a political status and potential site of agency and power” ([Krystalli, 2021](#), p. 126).

The inclusive victim consciousness makes the concept of solidarity more complex than [Wilde’s \(2013\)](#) definition, highlighted at the beginning of this section. [Prainsack \(2020\)](#) defines **solidarity** as “the practice that expresses the willingness to support others with whom we recognize similarity in a relevant respect” (p. 127). [Bauder & Juffs \(2020\)](#) define six types of solidarity that

are useful for this analysis of the Brazilian case: solidarity as loyalty, Indigenous solidarity, self-centred solidarity, emotional reflexive solidarity, rational reflexive solidarity, and recognitive solidarity.<sup>2</sup> In my interviews, I could not identify Indigenous solidarity because refugees in Brazil did not refer to their solidarity acts as connected to their ancestors and/or land. I could not perceive that their solidarity narratives and acts were calculated with pragmatical interests to improve their well-being. On the contrary, refugees were sharing food and time with other populations. Therefore, I did not identify self-centred solidarity in the refugees' narratives.

Refugees' acts of solidarity can represent solidarity as loyalty when refugees are solidary with other refugees from their own community. Solidarity acts can also highlight emotional reflexive solidarity when they are "based on sympathy, compassion, friendship [...] and identification with the victim" (Bauder & Juffs, 2020, p. 48). In this sense, emotional reflexive solidarity dialogues with the concept of inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015). Refugees' solidarity discourses can also show rational reflexive solidarity when they express an idea of "community of us all." Finally, it is possible to recognize the solidarity of refugees as an expression of reciprocity towards host communities, reflecting recognitive solidarity.

Refugees faced suffering experiences in their origin countries, allowing them to create an inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015) towards other groups in the host countries also suffering because of the

pandemic. This inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015) helps to explain why refugees (even though they are a left-behind group in sanitary crises) adopt different types of solidarity narratives (solidarity as loyalty, emotional reflexive solidarity, rational reflexive solidarity, and recognitive solidarity; Bauder & Juffs, 2020) towards different groups affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Refugees In Brazil During the Outbreak of the Pandemic

Brazil is the largest country in Latin America (considering population, territory, and economy). The country adopted a progressive asylum law with its own refugee status determination mechanism based on an expanded definition of asylum, including people fleeing a situation of severe and generalized violations of human rights (Jatobá & Martuscelli, 2018). Since 2019, Brazil has been recognizing Venezuelans as refugees based on this clause (CONARE & Obmigra, 2020). According to Brazilian law and the Constitution, asylum seekers and refugees have the same rights as Brazilians, including the right to education and work and the right to access health care and social assistance.<sup>3</sup> At the end of 2019, 31,996 refugees were living in Brazil, coming from Venezuela (20,935), Syria (7,768), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (1,209), and 80 other nations. Between 2011 and 2019, 239,706 asylum seekers arrived in the country (CONARE & Obmigra, 2020). In 2019, Brazil received the sixth highest number of asylum seekers globally (UNHCR, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>According to Bauder & Juffs (2020), solidarity as loyalty can "be summarised as 'helping your "own" people'" (p. 49); Indigenous solidarity "can relate to the spiritual connection between people, their ancestors, and to the land" (p. 49); self-centred solidarity "is based on practical motivations and calculated interest in improving or preserving one's own situation" (p. 50); emotional reflexive solidarity is "centered on mutual understanding, sympathy, and empathy" (Kapeller & Wolkenstein, 2013, p. 482, quoted in Bauder & Juffs, 2020, p. 50); rational reflexive solidarity "is part of an expression of a singular 'community of us all'" (Bauder & Juffs, 2020, p. 51); and recognitive solidarity "is framed in terms of reciprocity" (p. 52). For further discussion, see Figure 1 in Bauder & Juffs (2020, p. 48).

<sup>3</sup>Lei No. 9.474, de 22 de Julho de 1997, Col. Leis Rep. Fed. Brasil, 189 (7, t.1): 4227, Julho 1997.

A report from the UNHCR and Cátedra Sérgio Vieira de Mello (2019) concluded that refugees in Brazil face a higher risk of discrimination and xenophobia when accessing public services (including health). Besides that, even if refugees were, on average, more educated than Brazilians, they had higher unemployment rates and lower salaries than nationals. This situation put refugees in a more vulnerable situation than Brazilians when the pandemic started, as shown by Martuscelli (2021). Many refugees had small businesses producing and selling food. They had to close due to the initial lockdowns in many Brazilian states. Other refugees were working in essential services, including supermarkets and cleaning companies. Finally, unemployed refugees could not continue job hunting due to the lockdowns (Martuscelli, 2021).

There was much uncertainty about the disease during the first two weeks of the pandemic outbreak in Brazil (when this study was conducted). The Brazilian federal government did not adopt the WHO-recommended measures (Jubilut et al., 2020). Refugees and immigrants were a left-behind population (Martuscelli, 2021). In fact, refugees faced the same challenges as Brazilians considering their socio-economic profile and access to protection connected to work, challenges aggravated by the pandemic (i.e., the lack of information and fear of xenophobia when accessing health care), and new challenges created by the pandemic, including the closures of borders and essential services such as companies that send money abroad (Martuscelli, 2021).

## METHODOLOGY

Refugees are experts of their own experiences (Hynes, 2003). Therefore, the best way to understand how refugees have displayed solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic involves considering their lived experiences and how they reflect on them. I conducted 29 semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Høffding & Martiny, 2016)<sup>4</sup> with refugees living in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro between March 27, 2020, and April 6, 2020. São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are states where many refugees live and where their governors adopted WHO-recommended measures to close non-essential businesses and schools and implement social distancing measures.

The solidarity narratives of refugees cannot be explained by the poor Brazilian management of the pandemic since the interviews were conducted in the first two weeks when nobody knew how the Brazilian government would perform. There were no differences in the solidarity narratives of interviewees considering their nationality, age, or gender. All interviewees were declared as refugees according to Article 1 of the Brazilian Asylum Law (Law 9474/1997).<sup>5</sup> I employed a snowballing strategy to recruit the participants (Noy, 2008), contacting two community leaders who gave me the contact information of other refugees until the point of saturation, when no new information was being provided.

Most participants in this research project were male (86.20%) and young (34.5 years; range: 20–48 years), coming from the DRC,

<sup>4</sup>According to Høffding & Martiny (2016, p. 545), “the phenomenological interview consists of two intricately linked tiers. The first is the interview itself as the second person perspective described above, while the second is a phenomenological analysis of the first tier. In the first tier, we generate descriptions of experiential content and gain intimate first-hand knowledge of the interviewee’s lived experience. In the second tier, relying on the phenomenological method (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, chap. 2), we analyze these descriptions, in such a way that they might be generalized to say something about experiential structures and hence subjectivity as such.”

<sup>5</sup>Lei No. 9.474, de 22 de Julho de 1997, Col. Leis Rep. Fed. Brasil, 189 (7, t.1): 4227, Julho 1997.



Syria, Venezuela, Mali, Cameroon, Guinea-Conakry, and Guyana. Table 1 in the online Appendix shows the main characteristics of the participants. The interviewees lived in Brazil for at least three years (mean = 6.82 years; median = 7 years; max. = 12 years). Almost 50% of refugees were employed (14/29, including 3 in essential services and 3 working from a home office), 8 of 29 were self-employed or freelancers (4 in the food business), and 7 were unemployed.

This research followed the ethical recommendations of the code of ethics of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM, 2019), considering the principles of doing no harm, respecting refugees' confidentiality and privacy, and guaranteeing voluntary informed participation based on participants' oral informed consent (as an extra measure to avoid privacy and confidentiality breaches). I conducted all the interviews using WhatsApp's audio call function to respect social distancing measures.<sup>6</sup> The interviews were conducted in Portuguese, English, or French, following each interviewee's preference. I transcribed and analyzed the content of the interviews using ATLAS.ti 8 (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany).

This article is part of a larger research project aiming to understand how refugees in Brazil were affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. I translated all the project documents and the refugees' quotations from Portuguese to English. The questionnaire (available in the online Appendix) had no specific questions involving solidarity or past suffering experiences of refugees in their origin countries. However, solidarity emerged as an essential topic to understanding the living experiences of refugees in Brazil during the pandemic outbreak in

the country. Of 29 refugees, 23 expressed solidarity narratives, especially when answering the following questions: "How do you think that the Brazilian government could help refugees during this time of COVID-19?" and "How do you think that this pandemic affects the life of refugees in general?" One limitation of this study is that the solidarity narratives appeared in the interviews of refugees during the first two weeks of the pandemic in Brazil. Therefore, it cannot infer the long-term effects of these narratives.

## RESULTS

### Inclusive Victim Consciousness of Refugees in Brazil

The inclusive victim consciousness approach presupposes that a group that has suffered before it recognizes suffering in another group (Vollhardt, 2015). During the interviews, refugees from Syria, Venezuela, and the DRC reflected on how their previous experiences during armed conflicts and humanitarian crises prepared them for the pandemic. One refugee from DRC explained that staying at home was not difficult for him:

When I lived in Africa, like when there was a war there, I had to stay at home. Because we lived this life. I was born in 1992; I started to see the war. I lived this for 22 years. When I arrived in Brazil, I left the war. I lived a life like that before: today you are walking on the street, playing ball. Tomorrow they warn everyone on the television about going home. They warn everyone that there is going to be war. For me, [staying at home] is normal.

*(28-year-old interviewee, March 27, 2020)*

A Congolese refugee also explained that he knew how to behave in crisis situations, and because of that, he decided to stock food at home: "I will tell you something, I already

<sup>6</sup>Tools and discussions on primary data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic are available from Samuels (2020).

participated in the war, I have been through this when a big thing comes, I can speak, I am the first person to be more afraid" (35-year-old interviewee, March 28, 2020). A Syrian refugee also explained he did not panic because he already faced a similar situation in his home country:

Actually, to be honest, I am not so much in panic. I don't know. Like last time I was talking to friends, like Syrian friends and maybe because we faced something similar like this before. It was not a virus; it was a war. So it was like we had to stay at home and we could not go out for some time. We know what it means to have your food, save some food, manage to survive with the minimum, and not have work and things like this. So I am not very much in shock now.

*(30-year-old interviewee, March 31, 2020)*

This reflection of being prepared to face a situation of crisis also appeared in the interview of a Venezuelan woman:

We have been through situations in our country where, like, not being able to leave home, rationing [resources], not having food [to buy] ... so, at least this makes me a little more mature. In other words, [it helped me] accept the situation of not being able to leave the house, of having to ration the food, of being cautious with the expenses. [...] As I said, we already have this issue of coming from many needs, so we always have [this mentality,] "I'll buy something and save one here if anything [happens]." Having food is the biggest worry always. So I said, "It's okay, there is food, we are getting ready, I'm doing it. For now, there is food, so everything is fine."

*(37-year-old interviewee, April 6, 2020)*

Another Congolese refugee explained that he feared COVID-19 because he had already experienced living through the Ebola epidemic in his home country:

I am also afraid because [...] I have already experienced this in Africa. It was not with coronavirus; it was other viruses that passed there in Africa. [...] There was Ebola in Africa. Ebola was born in my country, right? We already had all this exposure to take care of ourselves physically. We already know.

*(28-year-old interviewee, March 27, 2020)*

The preceding quotes indicate refugees' experiences of suffering in their home countries (due to war, food shortages, and other epidemics). Alam's (2020) study with refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq living through the COVID-19 pandemic in Frankfurt also found that "refugees showed in conversations that they were used to daily curfews due to armed conflicts in their native countries" (p. 119). Refugees faced suffering experiences that marked them significantly and emerged during their reflections about living the pandemic outbreak in Brazil. Therefore, refugees' own suffering seems to make them more sensitive in facing the COVID-19 responses in Brazil. This has allowed them to develop inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015) towards other groups suffering because of COVID-19.

### Solidarity in Refugees' Narratives

The interviews with refugees indicate that they suffered in their home countries, making them more empathic to other people's suffering due to the pandemic. This inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015) seems to explain participants' different solidarity narratives directed towards Brazilian groups in situations of vulnerability, the refugee community, and the Brazilian population in general. These narratives show respectively (a) emotional reflexive solidarity, (b) solidarity as loyalty combined with emotional reflexive solidarity, and (c) rational reflexive solidarity mixed with emotional reflexive solidarity and recognitive solidarity (Bauder & Juffs, 2020).

### *Emotional Reflexive Solidarity Towards Vulnerable Brazilian Groups*

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in Brazil, many refugees were facing a difficult

situation since they were unemployed or prevented from working as informal workers or self-employed. They were not sure how to pay their bills. Even employed refugees were worried about a future economic crisis and losing their jobs. However, they found space in their reflections to think about people who were in a worse situation than them, as explained by this Syrian refugee: "With our money from our work we help others sometimes, those in a situation worse than us, you know?" (33-year-old interviewee, March 30, 2020). Refugees who suffered identify the suffering of vulnerable people, including homeless people. One Congolese refugee was homeless when he first arrived in Brazil, and now he was sharing information as a way to help homeless people during the pandemic:

When I got here, I lived on the street. I lived on the street with homeless people. At that time, there was no such thing [as COVID-19]. Today, there is this thing. I think it will be difficult for people who are living on the street. But we are trying to share information, addresses of hostels that help, that can help them to live, to eat. I have an address, and I'm sending it to people because I don't know. [...] I'm also sharing with people who have no place to see where they can sleep and take care of themselves.

*(28-year-old interviewee, March 27, 2020)*

Other refugees also reflected that homeless people were in a worse situation than refugees:

But I imagine other people. For example, these people who are on the street, or the people who live in a shelter, I don't know how things are there.

*(37-year-old Venezuelan refugee interviewee, April 6, 2020)*

We are protecting ourselves, but imagine the homeless people who depend on the government, the city hall, other people for help, because they don't want to be sick.

*(39-year-old Congolese refugee interviewee, April 4, 2020)*

Refugees also reflected on poor Brazilians and self-employed Brazilians who could not stay at home since they needed to work to feed their families:

I don't know, I was thinking, now there are a lot of poor people who have no money to support themselves ... I think these people will not be able to stay at home.

*(28-year-old Syrian refugee interviewee, April 4, 2020)*

There is a problem in Brazil that not only refugees need [help], but many people need it here.

*(27-year-old Syrian refugee interviewee, April 3, 2020)*

Refugees were also sharing food with people in need. This was the case of this Congolese woman who was unemployed:

I'm getting help from other migrants. I'm also passing it on to those who need it who are closer to me so that I will help them. But we have to stay at home. [...] To tell you the truth, everything that I'm receiving ... food package, I'm also sharing it with anyone who needs it.

*(36-years-old interviewee, April 3, 2020)*

A self-employed Venezuelan woman was also helping people in need, including Brazilians:

We help here too. When we know that a person needs food, or they need something, we say, "Ah, I have such a thing, I have rice." So when I can, I do it ... I receive a food package. Then I saw a friend, "I need money for food." Then I said, "Okay." So I also share it with Brazilian friends who are facing difficulties. I make a bag with rice, beans and such things and give it to them. So I always try to help people.

*(37-year-old interviewee, April 6, 2020)*

These illustrative quotes of solidarity towards vulnerable groups (the homeless and people in need) can be interpreted as examples of emotional reflexive solidarity (Bauder & Juffs, 2020). Because refugees recognize the suffering of other groups, they have empathy and compassion towards them. This also indicates the inclusive victim consciousness towards these other groups

that are suffering during the pandemic (Vollhardt, 2015). Refugees do not perceive homeless people and those in need as competing for the same resources. They recognize them as victims of a challenging situation (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) that need help.

### ***Solidarity as Loyalty Combined with Emotional Reflexive Solidarity Towards Refugees in Need***

The second type of solidarity expressed by the refugees was directed to other communities of refugees living in vulnerable conditions. While these narratives and actions can be classified as solidarity as loyalty, that is, refugees supporting people from the same group (forced displaced non-nationals), they also reflect a logic of emotional reflexive solidarity, since refugees are helping other refugees (from the same nationality or not) who are in a more difficult situation aggravated by the pandemic (Bauder & Juffs, 2020). This solidarity is based not only on nationality or being a foreigner but also on the recognition that people are suffering.

One Congolese refugee was a doctor in the DRC, but he could not practise medicine in Brazil. While he was facing individual challenges during the pandemic, he was also supporting other refugees living in abandoned buildings (called occupations—*ocupações* in Portuguese). In one of these places, two hundred families were living in challenging conditions: “There is no water, no electricity, no hygiene conditions. Many people are asking for help there. Because there is no help. You don’t know where to go. There’s nothing there” (40-year-old interviewee, March 31, 2020). He reflected how he could not be

at peace knowing that people were suffering and how he was supporting them:

I’m fine, but my brother, my sister<sup>7</sup> lives badly right now, very badly. They have no better place to live, no food to eat, no money to do anything. [...] That is why Congolese refugees who live in São Paulo will help them. [...] We give them food packages and complementary money to buy typical products of our country, pay for transportation to go to the hospital, or buy other things they need. It allows people to eat the way they want. We organize ourselves to help our brothers that are suffering, that have nothing.

Another Congolese refugee who was unemployed reflected that he also supported refugee families in occupations when he worked. However, he could not do it anymore:

Sometimes, when I worked, I would gather some friends, and say, “Let’s go there.” ... I would buy some cookies and go there to give them to the children. [...] I remember that I had a friend from the company that bought toys and gave them to children at the end of the year.

*(25-year-old interviewee, April 1, 2020)*

A 32-year-old Syrian refugee was also trying to help his self-employed Syrian friends who could no longer work by sharing information that could help them as well as sharing contact information of organizations providing material support (April 4, 2020). This Congolese refugee leader of a migrant-led organization organized a solidarity campaign to support migrants and refugees who were suffering due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic:

We try to do a solidarity campaign. When a person in need enters in contact, we try to ask who has more [to share] so we can support who doesn’t. Yesterday we went to visit a woman who has two daughters. She is pregnant, her husband is in Angola, and she has no food at home. Her fridge is empty. So instead

<sup>7</sup>In this case, “brother” and “sister” refer to people from the same community and not people that are children of the same father and/or mother.

of telling her, "Come and get it [the food]," we went there.

*(40-year-old interviewee, April 3, 2020)*

### ***Rational Reflexive Solidarity Mixed with Emotional Reflexive Solidarity and Recognitive Solidarity Towards the Brazilian Population in General***

The last type of solidarity shown by refugees during the pandemic mainly appeared as an answer to the following question: "How do you think that the Brazilian government could help refugees during this time of COVID-19?" After previous questions, where refugees responded by reflecting on how the pandemic had affected their lives and the lives of other refugees, I expected that refugees (who recognized they were left behind and the authorities did not consider their needs and particularities during the pandemic) would focus only on their own experiences of suffering during the pandemic. Additionally, the phrasing of the question also directed refugees towards a more in-group reflection, that is, how the government should help refugees, which is a specific group, affected by the pandemic.

However, most of the interviewees (11/23) expressing solidarity narratives answered this question by saying that the government should not think only of the refugees, since all Brazilians were suffering:

Ah, I can't say, "Just the refugee," you have to help everyone, right? Because, in addition to being a refugee, we are also human beings, do you understand?

*(25-year-old Congolese refugee interviewee, April 1, 2020)*

It is everyone, not only the refugee, the Brazilian, the foreigner, it is affecting everyone in various sectors.

*(34-year-old Guinean refugee interviewee, March 30, 2020)*

I cannot be too selfish. In the same way that refugees are going to be helped, you have to help Brazilian

families, who are also going through this situation, regardless of being rich or poor.

*(39-year-old Congolese refugee interviewee, April 4, 2020)*

[Provide help] not only to refugees. Everybody is people, everybody is the same.

*(40-year-old Congolese refugee interviewee, March 21, 2020)*

I think that not only refugees have to be helped. Refugees are a percentage of the Brazilian people, right? [The government] should help us the same way they are doing with Brazilians. But they have to help Brazilians too.

*(21-year-old Syrian refugee interviewee, April 4, 2020)*

The refugees reflected that the pandemic affected everybody and that it was not the time to be selfish. One refugee from Guyana explained that the government should help everybody and that refugees should help other people as well:

Everybody is passing through the same situation; whether you are Brazilian or you are a refugee, or you are a "foreigner" ... we are all passing through the same thing. [...] As refugees, we should not be thinking only about ourselves. However, we should be thinking about how we can maybe help those around ourselves. [...] The government has to help everybody with no discrimination. Everybody, refugees, migrants, Brazilians, should be treated the same way.

*(48-year-old interviewee, April 2, 2020)*

This logic of "we are all in the same boat" reflects a recognition of shared suffering, that is, an explicit understanding that we all are victims of this pandemic. In this sense, these reflections that the Brazilian government should help everybody and not only refugees indicate rational reflexive solidarity (Bauder & Juffs, 2020), where refugees recognize a community of all of us. At the same time, there are also elements of emotional reflexive solidarity (Bauder & Juffs, 2020) when refugees

who suffered are empathic towards the suffering of all Brazilians facing the COVID-19 pandemic. This compassion is also connected with refugees' inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015). A Congolese refugee who already suffered the war in his country (see the previous section) wanted the government to help wealthy Brazilians who could be harmed because of the pandemic:

I would ask [the Brazilian government] that this help can be for everyone, because a rich person can also sometimes lack food in her house, and she cannot be left behind too. If this help is only for a category of people, the other categories will not have access [to it]. I think this is not the best. I want a solution for everyone.

*(35-year-old interviewee, March 28, 2020)*

While this solidarity towards the general population is based on recognizing that all are victims in this pandemic, it also has a component of reciprocity: refugees helping people who helped them before. Refugees perceived that Brazil welcomed them, and many received help from Brazilian people. Hence, being in solidarity with them would be a way to return the solidarity that they received before. Therefore, these narratives bring elements of recognitive solidarity (Bauder & Juffs, 2020). This was the case for a self-employed Syrian refugee who argued that the government should help everybody because he was worried that he could not pay his rent, which could harm his landlady, who was nice to him: "[Help] not only for refugees but for everyone because I am suffering from this [pandemic] and my landlady is waiting for the rent. If I do not pay it, her bills will be delayed too" (40-year-old interviewee, March 27, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The Brazilian case helps us to understand that refugees who suffered in their home

countries can empathize with the suffering of other groups, such as populations in a situation of vulnerability (e.g., homeless and Brazilians in need), other refugees in a worse situation (e.g., people living in abandoned buildings), and the Brazilian population in general, which has been impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. This solidarity seems to be based on an inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015) of refugees in Brazil. The participants' narratives also indicate different types of solidarity as discussed by Bauder & Juffs (2020): emotional reflective solidarity towards suffering groups; solidarity as loyalty together with emotional reflective solidarity towards other refugees; and rational reflective solidarity mixed with emotional reflective solidarity and recognitive solidarity towards the Brazilian population as a whole.

This analysis can contribute to understanding refugee solidarity in other contexts discussed previously in this article. The use of the inclusive victim consciousness approach (Vollhardt, 2015) and different types of solidarity (Bauder & Juffs, 2020) may explain other situations of refugee solidarity during this pandemic. For example, during the first lockdown in Italy, UNHCR Italy lent its Instagram account to refugees to send messages to Italians using #lorestoa-casa [I stay at home] (ANSA, 2020). In their posts, refugees reflected on the suffering they experienced in their home countries (and their experiences when they had to stay at home because of war or humanitarian crisis) to justify that they understood the situation that Italy was facing. They sent messages of strength to the Italian population and solidarity in these difficult times. These messages of solidarity from refugees in Italy also seem to indicate an inclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2015) towards Italians facing the first lockdown in the country. It

also shows emotional reflexive solidarity—that is, refugees had compassion and empathy towards and identified with the Italians suffering during this pandemic (Bauder & Juffs, 2020).

Finally, this article contributes to the literature on solidarity and refugee studies, considering the living experiences of refugees, a left-behind population, during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Refugees reflected on their own solidarity narratives in a moment of uncertainty and suffering. Solidarity was so strong in the refugees' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic that this emerged even in a questionnaire that was not focused on this topic. Solidarity within refugee populations should be further studied since it helps to explain an essential angle of refugees' contribution to host countries.

Further studies should adopt an age and gender lens to approach asylum and solidarity during COVID-19. Other studies should consider the long-term impact of the pandemic on refugee lives, including in their solidarity towards other groups. Prainsack (2020) argues that after an initial surge, solidarity may fade away when people start to "blame" groups that are different, especially with the lack of institutions providing economic and mental stability for people to support others.

This study represents a unique picture of refugees during the first two weeks of the pandemic in Brazil. Considering that refugees' solidarity narratives seem to be based on their inclusive victim consciousness, it is probable that it will persist during the pandemic, even considering the lack of institutional support and responses to fight the pandemic in Brazil. Nevertheless, further studies should continue to investigate refugees' solidarity and COVID-19 in Global South countries.

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