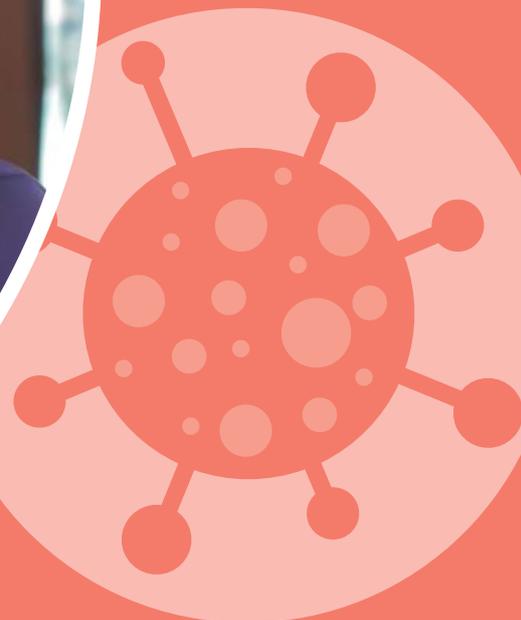




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Covid-19 and Civic and Democratic Space

BRAZIL

Brazil has the second highest number of infections and deaths from Covid-19 in the world. President Bolsonaro's rejection of scientific evidence and attempts to obstruct public health measures, among other failings, allowed the virus to spread rapidly. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in Brazil, particularly impacting indigenous and Black communities.

In February 2020, federal authorities declared a state of emergency in Brazil, followed by similar declarations by state and municipal governments in March and April 2020. Federal, state and municipal governments have authority to adopt measures in response to the pandemic. Most Covid-19 measures, including lockdowns and social distancing measures, have been undertaken by state and municipal authorities.

With public attention focused on the Covid-19 crisis, the government has sought to push through legislative changes on controversial issues such as the regulation of land grabbing in the Amazon rainforest.¹

FACTS AND FIGURES



As of 26 April -
Covid-19 cases:
14,370,456.

Deaths from Covid-19:
392,204²



The rate of femicide increased in 14 out of the 26 states in Brazil in the period between March and May 2020 as compared to the same period in 2019.³



At least **1,048** indigenous people have died from the Covid-19 virus in Brazil.⁴

Distribution of educational materials for the prevention of gender violence by ActionAid partner Centro das Mulheres do Cabo



HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT OF COVID-19 MEASURES

Freedom of Expression and the Right to Information

Authorities in Brazil failed to uphold **the right to information** during the Covid-19 pandemic. President Bolsonaro frequently shared misinformation about the virus, downplaying its severity and encouraging the use of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment. On 23 March 2020, President Bolsonaro issued a presidential order to suspend deadlines for information requests from government agencies, including information regarding health policies. The Federal Supreme Court overturned the proposed changes.⁸ In June 2020, the Ministry of Health stopped publishing Covid-19 cumulative infection and death tolls until it was ordered to resume publication by the Federal Supreme Court.⁹

In violation of the right to **freedom of expression**, President Bolsonaro's government has sought to penalise critics of its response to Covid-19. At the request of ministers, federal police have opened criminal investigations into government critics for, among other actions, publishing a cartoon, writing an opinion column and making statements during a television debate that were unfavourable to the government.¹⁰ These attacks on dissenting voices in Brazil occur in a wider context of harassment and intimidation of journalists by President Bolsonaro and his supporters.

Economic and Social Rights

By 26 April 2021, 392,204 people had died of Covid-19 in Brazil, the second highest death toll of any country in the world. President Bolsonaro rejected scientific recommendations for how to deal with the pandemic and obstructed attempts by other government authorities to implement Covid-19 measures, thereby undermining **the right to health**. By March 2021, intensive care units in most states were at or near capacity.¹¹ President Bolsonaro dismissed former Health Minister Luiz Mandetta over disagreements about the use of social distancing measures and hydroxychloroquine. After the resignation of his replacement over similar disagreements, President



By September 2020, judges had ordered nearly

53,700 people to be transferred to house arrest to reduce prison overcrowding during the pandemic.⁵



By March 2021, more than **64,000** cases

of Covid-19 had been registered in the adult prison system and more than **7,000** cases in the juvenile detention system – the lack of testing in some prisons means the real figure is likely higher.⁶



The Brazilian government declined formal offers for Covid-19 vaccines from vaccine suppliers 11 times.⁷

Distribution of food baskets by ActionAid partner MOC, from Bahia. Photo: Divulgação MOC

Bolsonaro appointed as Health Minister an army official, Eduardo Pazuello, with no public health experience and he was later replaced by Marcelo Queiroga, the current Health Minister and fourth since the start of the pandemic.

The authorities failed to ensure the **right to health of prisoners, indigenous people and Black people** in particular. Overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, unsanitary living conditions and insufficient Covid-19 measures led to outbreaks of the virus in prisons. Indigenous communities were hard hit by the pandemic in part due to structural racism in healthcare and incursions into their lands by miners, loggers and missionaries.¹² Black people in Brazil are disproportionately in low-income, informal employment and overcrowded housing, increasing exposure to the virus, and are more likely to live in regions with lower access to healthcare.¹³ Black people were more likely than any other group to report Covid-19 symptoms and more likely to die in hospital from the virus.¹⁴

President Bolsonaro rejected efforts to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on marginalised groups. In July 2020, President Bolsonaro vetoed a law requiring masks in detention facilities, but the Federal Supreme Court ruled that the veto had violated procedural rules. In June 2020, Congress passed a bill ordering the government to provide emergency healthcare and other assistance to indigenous people, which President Bolsonaro partially vetoed.

After pressure from civil society, unemployed people and informal workers became eligible for **temporary income support** of 600 BRL (US\$115) per month from April 2020, with single mothers able to receive twice the amount. At least 63.5 million people benefited from this scheme.¹⁵

The **right to education** was severely impacted by the closure of schools and universities and shift to online classes in most states. Existing disparities in access to education were exacerbated by the shift to online learning; 39% of public school students in urban areas do not have a computer at home, compared to 9% of private school students, and many students in rural areas lack access to the internet.¹⁶

Women and Girls

Restrictions on movement to slow the spread of Covid-19 and increased economic stress contributed to an increase in **violence against women**. Calls to a hotline to report violence against women increased 27% in March and April 2020 compared to the previous year.¹⁷ The number of requests for protective measures by survivors of domestic violence fell substantially in the same period, suggesting that women faced increased difficulties in accessing in-person support during the pandemic.¹⁸

Access to **sexual and reproductive health** has been restricted. Some local authorities suspended sexual and reproductive health services, including providing contraception. Only 42 hospitals across the country were performing abortions legally during the pandemic, compared to 76 in 2019.¹⁹ On 1 June 2020, the Ministry of Health published a technical note suggesting measures to improve access to sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic. President Bolsonaro misrepresented the contents of the note in a tweet, and two of its authors were subsequently removed from their leadership positions.²⁰



Excessive use of Force

Police violence escalated during the pandemic. In Rio de Janeiro, police forces continued to kill people in highly militarised operations in marginalised neighbourhoods. Deaths from operations in April and May 2020 increased by 57.9% and 16.7% respectively compared to the previous year.²¹ 79.1% of people killed by the police were Black and 74.3% were under 30 years old.²² Police operations impeded community efforts to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic. In June 2020, the Federal Supreme Court issued a preliminary decision to suspend police operations in Rio de Janeiro during the pandemic, leading to a drop in killings by police. Yet despite the official suspension, local journalists report that police operations are still taking place, and report violence and abusive behaviour by police officers during operations.²³

NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Brazilian government should:

- ensure its response to the Covid-19 virus aligns with the recommendations of the World Health Organisation and rooted in scientific evidence to uphold the right to health. The authorities should provide additional resources and take targeted measures to protect the health of marginalised groups, including prisoners, indigenous peoples and Black people;
- ensure that the vaccine is distributed by the public and universal health system, instead of advancing proposals that allow companies to cut ahead of the vaccine line²⁴;
- respect, protect and fulfil the right to freedom of expression, including by refraining from investigating, arresting, or harassing people for simply speaking out about the pandemic;
- fulfil the right to information by providing comprehensive and reliable data regarding the spread of the Covid-19 virus;
- take measures to prevent violence against women including funding sufficient numbers of appropriate shelters, in cooperation with relevant non-government organisations; and
- continue providing temporary income support as a form of basic income, extending it to include indigenous peoples and traditional communities.

Project Maré de Sabores, from Redes da Maré, partner from Favela da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, distributes meals to homeless people.

Endnotes

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August 2021