

THE RIGHT TO BELONG: HAITIAN REFUGEES AND THE POLITICS OF DIGNITY IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

The present research aims to analyze the situation of Haitian refugees in Brazil, focusing on the difficulties faced in the process of social, economic, and cultural integration. The guiding question "What is the refugee's place?" has been the subject of intense discussion, especially in scenarios marked by changes caused by humanitarian crises, political instability, and natural catastrophes. The methodology adopted was based on the analysis of the data provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), with a qualitative and quantitative approach to the level of integration of Haitians in Brazilian territory. The recent data of IOM (2022) indicate extremely low indicators of integration: 0, 48% for men and only 0, 37% for women, evidencing a concerning scenario of social exclusion and marginalization. These numbers signal that the existing mechanisms of support for the refugee population prove to be insufficient to promote their full inclusion. It was identified in the literature that the main integration hindering factors were the low level of education, low social integration, and linguistic barriers, the last two being interdependent. Hence, it is proposed an offer of professional training and Portuguese learning courses is proposed, in addition to the implementation of the existing reception strategies, considering the particularities of the Haitian migratory flow and its social implications. Therefore, it is inferred that the research reinforces the importance of discussing, proposing, and implementing more effective strategies of reception that consider the particularities of Haitian migratory flow and its social implications. The conclusion highlights that the debate about the integration of refugees is not only about the well-being of refugees but also has a significant impact on Brazilian society as a whole, challenging the country to rethink its role as a welcoming nation and compromise on human rights.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Human Rights, Citizenship.

I. Introduction

Approximately 5.4 million people across 162 countries are currently seeking international protection and awaiting determination of their refugee status (OIM, 2022). Among them, 312,000 are Haitian nationals (ACNUR, 2023), with 87,000 residing in Brazil (ONU, 2023). Within this context, it becomes imperative to address the significance of reception and integration, as these individuals are entering entirely new social and cultural environments and must be situated accordingly.

Furthermore, access to documentation, opportunities, basic needs, and cultural understanding are essential components of a dignified and quality life. While these individuals may initially be received as

refugees, this status is inherently temporary, either until repatriation becomes viable or until they are granted citizenship. Among the Haitian population residing in Brazil, 3,138 refugees were supported by the OIM in obtaining necessary documentation, and 1,987 participated in integration programs promoted by that institution (OIM, 2024). According to the IOM's Migrant Integration Index (2022), around 30% of surveyed Haitians have been living in Brazil for the past five years, but compared to Venezuelan refugees, they display lower integration rates.

This is compounded by comparatively lower educational attainment among Haitians, which, alongside language and cultural barriers, plays a decisive role in the integration process.

The core issue addressed in this study is the position of vulnerability and uncertainty occupied by Haitian refugees. These individuals are often victimized, isolated, and marginalized—remaining at the periphery of a society that is not their own, and within which the customs and language are foreign. As Arendt observes, human life encompasses more than the circumstances in which individuals find themselves (Arendt, 2007, p. 17). This study therefore posits that, despite seeking stability and security, refugees are not fully integrated into the societies they enter.

Accordingly, this research aims to analyze, understand, and explain the complexity (Morin, 2005) of factors contributing to the low integration of Haitian refugees in Brazil. The ultimate goal is to enhance the implementation of existing programs and develop new strategies for the social inclusion of this highly vulnerable group residing in Brazilian territory.

Analyzing the situation of Haitian refugees in Brazil demands a theoretical framework capable of addressing the multidimensional and complex nature of migratory phenomena. From this standpoint, the research is grounded in the notion that human rights and the principles of hospitality require a paradigm shift in how legal principles are applied in light of human dignity. This perspective necessitates a distinction between Law and Justice, particularly when the former — though rooted in the Principle of Universality — proves insufficient to accommodate the particularities of specific and concrete realities such as refugee conditions (Pereira, 2014).

The debate concerning the human condition is equally vital, under the premise that individuals are shaped by their historical and social contexts. The relationship between individuals and society reveals that identity, rights, and political existence are deeply influenced by the extent to which individuals are granted — or denied — a place within the collective (Arendt, 2007). This perspective expands the discussion surrounding belonging, citizenship, and social visibility — core elements in the analysis of migrant integration.

Moreover, it is essential to examine migration through the lens of complexity. The reality faced by Haitian refugees cannot be adequately captured by reductionist approaches; instead, it requires a comprehensive analysis of intersecting factors such as social, linguistic, and cultural variables. The Theory of Complexity precisely advocates for such an integrative and systemic understanding — one that grasps the whole without disregarding its constituent parts (Carvalho et al., 2020; Tôrres, 2005). This framework aligns with

the notion that addressing human problems involving multiple dimensions demands the articulation of diverse branches of knowledge to devise more effective solutions (Morin, 2005).

Thus, the theoretical foundation adopted in this study supports a critical and comprehensive analysis of the challenges surrounding the integration of Haitian refugees in Brazil, acknowledging the tension between legal normativity and social reality, as well as the intrinsic complexity of this phenomenon.

Secondary data analysis — obtained from institutional reports by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Brazil's National Secretariat of Justice (SENAJUS) — reveals a scenario marked by inequalities in the integration of Haitian refugees in Brazil, particularly within the social dimension. The indicators analyzed show that Haitians have lower social integration scores than other refugee groups, such as Venezuelans, even when they have resided in the country for similar periods (IOM, 2022).

The data demonstrate that language barriers are among the primary factors hindering the integration of Haitians. Limited proficiency in Portuguese restricts access to the labor market, public services, and social interactions, thereby impeding the formation of social bonds and a sense of belonging. Another significant finding concerns the impact of education and employment on social integration. The data show that refugees who are employed or enrolled in educational programs exhibit higher levels of social integration than those who are neither working nor studying, reinforcing the notion that access to work and education is crucial for fostering refugee autonomy and inclusion (IOM, 2022).

The study also observed that integration experiences vary depending on the structure and efficacy of local public policies. Municipalities with stronger intersectoral coordination, active civil society organizations, and well-established reception initiatives demonstrate better integration outcomes (Zogata-Kusz, 2022). However, the lack of targeted policies for the Haitian population and insufficient recognition of their cultural and linguistic diversity curtail the effectiveness of such initiatives (Harder et al., 2018).

From the perspective of Cost-Benefit Analysis, the findings suggest that the challenges faced by Haitian refugees cannot be understood in a linear or fragmented manner. Rather, the data reveal an interaction of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors that collectively generate and perpetuate exclusion. Consequently, integration policies must be designed in an integrated fashion, taking into account the interdependence of the multiple dimensions that shape policymaking regarding migration and refuge, weighing the cost of their making with the benefits that may be acquired depending on their effectiveness (Sunstein, 2018).

In sum, the findings highlight the urgent need for more inclusive public policies focused on Portuguese language instruction, recognition of professional qualifications, job creation, and the promotion of social inclusion. Coordinated implementation of these measures, with the active participation of refugees themselves, is essential to achieving fairer and more effective integration within the Brazilian context. The production of socially applicable knowledge reinforces the ethical commitment of this research to social

transformation and encouragement of policies that favor adaptability and practicality concerning the integration of both refugees and immigrants. (Pursuit of justice).

Furthermore, the development and implementation of measures to promote the social integration and economic inclusion of refugees are fundamental to ensuring a humane and inclusive reception. These policies must be constructed with a focus on the specific needs and characteristics of the Haitian population. In doing so, Brazil not only fulfills its humanitarian obligations but also strengthens democratic principles and fosters a more just and cohesive society.

This study adopts a qualitative-quantitative, applied, and explanatory bibliographic review approach. Secondary data were analyzed, sourced from both white and grey literature, to inform the discussion on refugee issues in Brazil. The epistemological framework is grounded in the Theory of Complexity (Morin, 2010, p. 102), which guided the interpretation of data provided by the IOM, UNHCR, SENAJUS, and other relevant institutions.

II. Analysis of the absolute and relative frequency of haitian integration in Brazilian territory

When a human being comes into contact with a new reality, they gradually become accustomed to it (Arendt, 2007). In this sense, refugees tend to perceive themselves through the eyes of those who receive them — as strangers and individuals in need — not necessarily rejected, but neither fully embraced. It is not uncommon for them to form small communities of their own nationality, where mutual support and shared cultural practices emerge. When refugees are seen as “others,” isolated from the rest, a social barrier is created between nationals and foreigners. In this context, recognizing the refugee as a complex human being — not merely by their legal status — constitutes the first step towards integration. As Morin (2005) points out, any action requires a strategy; however, such a strategy is not a rigid protocol but a dynamic process that adjusts to changes in the environment as they arise.

A more grounded understanding of this process begins with an individual analysis: a human being who carries with them all they have, seeking to settle in another country. Questions inevitably arise regarding where to live, how to live, and by what means. The country of origin is no longer an option, and thus, the person establishes themselves elsewhere. Many Haitians, for instance, left their country after the 2010 earthquake and undertook a long journey to Brazil, often arriving with limited knowledge of the country beyond its international soccer reputation (Rekomanse, 2014). To strip a person of their humanity or individuality would be unrealistic, since every human life represents a unique story (Arendt, 2007) — and it is precisely this human dimension that drives migration processes.

Among the 87,000 Haitians currently residing in Brazil (UN, 2023), 3,138 have received assistance from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in obtaining the necessary documentation, and 1,987 have taken part in the integration programs offered by the institution (IOM, 2024). According to the IOM's Migrant Integration Index (2022), approximately 30% of interviewed Haitians have lived in Brazil for the past five years. However, when compared to Venezuelan migrants, Haitians show lower rates of

integration. The evaluation criteria used in the index include language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and education level.

The IOM Brazil applied this Migrant Integration Index to assess beneficiaries of its Cash-Based Intervention (CBI) program, which was implemented to support vulnerable migrants and refugees in Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (IOM, 2022). This index evaluates different dimensions of integration using scores ranging from 0 to 1, indicating how various factors either promote or hinder adaptation to the host country.

Regarding the educational attainment of Haitians interviewed, most had completed either only part of primary education (Fundamental I), all of primary education (Fundamental II), or high school. In contrast, Venezuelan respondents tended to have completed higher education, including Master's and PhD degrees. Haitians with only Fundamental I education scored 0.38 on the integration index, while those with Fundamental II or high school scored 0.39. In comparison, Venezuelans with the same educational levels scored 0.51 and 0.52, respectively; those holding Master's or PhD degrees scored 0.62. Concerning language proficiency, which was measured based on the ability to communicate in Portuguese, Haitians scored 0.52, while Venezuelans scored 0.71. In the social integration dimension, which evaluates interpersonal and community relationships, Haitians scored 0.37, compared to 0.61 for Venezuelans — a clear difference particularly evident between those who work or study and those who do neither.

III. Main factors hindering integration

The integration of Haitian migrants into host countries such as Brazil faces substantial social and cultural barriers (IOM, 2023). One of the main hindrances is the level of education. Many Haitians arrive with low levels of formal education or with academic and professional qualifications that are not officially recognized in the host country. This restricts their employment opportunities and impedes access to skilled services, thereby pushing them toward informal or low-paying jobs and reinforcing cycles of vulnerability. Educational attainment encompasses a range of cognitive and social skills and, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022), it is positively correlated with the degree of integration — i.e., the higher the level of education, the greater the prospects for integration; conversely, the lower the level of education, the greater the obstacles encountered.

Another significant barrier is the language divide, as French and Haitian Creole are the predominant languages in Haiti, while Portuguese is the official language in Brazil. The stark difference between these languages creates immediate communication challenges. This linguistic barrier affects not only the search for employment but also access to public services such as healthcare, education, and social assistance. A lack of language proficiency can result in social isolation and exclusion, preventing full participation in the host society. In this regard, improved linguistic adaptation directly contributes to enhanced social integration, with both dimensions being closely interrelated (IOM, 2022).

Social integration itself presents a major challenge, especially as it is deeply connected to linguistic competence and the capacity to build interpersonal relationships with the local community. Haitians

display an average social integration score of 0.37, significantly lower than that of Venezuelans, who score 0.61. This data indicates that variations in social integration levels among interviewees are strongly associated with nationality. In the specific case of Haitians, the language barrier remains a considerable impediment to social inclusion. Communication limitations hinder access to services, social interaction, and opportunities for employment or education, thereby negatively impacting their overall experience in the host country.

These findings demonstrate that social integration is influenced by multiple interconnected factors. The three key factors—education, language, and social interaction — are mutually reinforcing. For instance, a low level of education may hinder the acquisition of a new language and limit entry into more qualified professional and social environments. Likewise, the language barrier may restrict access to training programs and opportunities for cultural integration. Social exclusion, in turn, exacerbates these limitations by creating an unwelcoming environment.

To mitigate these obstacles, targeted public policies must be implemented. Cost-Benefit Analysis, when expanded to encompass qualitative factors of migrant integration, enables policymakers to base their decisions on humanitarian outcomes as well as economic (Annema, Mouter & Razaei, 2015). According to Mannan (2001), migration involves different types of costs, and for the person who decides to migrate, it also begins with a personal cost-benefit thought, in which the benefits outweigh the costs. Hence, when it comes to policy making regarding the migrant population in a state of vulnerability, more so, it should be considered. Additionally, community-based initiatives that foster intercultural dialogue must be strengthened. Only through an integrated approach—attuned to the specific needs of the Haitian population — can genuine inclusion in host societies be achieved.

IV. Analysis of the feasibility of implementing adaptation and integration strategies for vulnerable Haitian refugees

The implementation of adaptation and integration strategies for vulnerable Haitian migrants in Brazil depends on multiple social, economic, and institutional factors. Considering that this group faces specific challenges, any integration proposal must be planned in an intersect oral manner and based on concrete data. It is essential that such strategies align with public policies on reception, inclusion, and human rights, as well as with the local realities of each municipality receiving these migrants (IOM. 2023).

The provision of Portuguese language courses is a crucial step in this process. Language is one of the main barriers to the integration of Haitians in Brazil, hindering their access to public services, education, and the formal labor market. Free and accessible language programs, with methodologies tailored to the immigrant profile, would significantly increase the chances of these individuals' active participation in society. Additionally, vocational training and the recognition of foreign academic degrees are complementary measures that strengthen their autonomy and economic inclusion. Decent work is a fundamental pillar of integration, as it provides financial stability, a sense of belonging, and personal development (IOM, 2022).

In the social dimension, the strengthening of community networks and psychological support structures is also vital for successful integration. Providing emotional support and creating spaces for intercultural dialogue and coexistence contributes to rebuilding social ties and combating isolation. Initiatives involving different societal groups can help foster respectful coexistence and the appreciation of diversity.

The coordination among different levels of government and the allocation of adequate resources are factors that directly impact the feasibility of such strategies. Municipalities receiving a significant number of Haitian refugees require technical and financial support from state and federal governments in order to structure their public services and develop specific actions. Moreover, it is necessary to establish continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for integration policies, ensuring that they effectively address the actual needs of the refugee population (IOM, 2023).

The International Migration Observatory - Observatório de Migrações Internacionais, OBMigra – compiles data regarding the situation of migrants in Brazil in the Refuge in Numbers Report, in which it's detailed the sociodemographic profile of asylum seekers and refugees, serving as an essential tool for formulating, implementing and adjusting of public policies for this population (Junger et al, 2024).

Therefore, any public policy proposal aimed at fostering the adaptation of Haitian refugees in Brazil should facilitate migratory regularization and access to civil documentation, ensure access to education, healthcare, housing, and decent work, promote vocational training and productive inclusion, and combat all forms of discrimination. Consequently, the implementation of adaptation and integration strategies must include the active participation of the migrants themselves in the process. Listening to their demands, respecting their culture, and involving them in the formulation of public policies are practices that reinforce their autonomy and protagonism.

The development of public policies targeting the Haitian refugee population in Brazil must go beyond isolated, assistance-based actions. The integration of this population is not limited to the provision of basic services but involves the recognition of their inherent dignity. Therefore, by offering real conditions for these individuals to rebuild their lives with autonomy and security, Brazil demonstrates its commitment to the foundations of democracy and human dignity, as established in its domestic legislation and in the international treaties to which it is a party. In this sense, beyond guaranteeing fundamental rights, public policies represent an opportunity for Brazil to consolidate itself as a pluralistic, just, and inclusive society. Based on Laws No. 9,474/1997 and No. 13,445/2017, in addition to international treaties signed by Brazil concerning the reception of refugees and migrants, there is a solid legal framework supporting actions of reception and integration. In recent years, Brazil has implemented significant initiatives, such as the internal relocation of Venezuelans under "Operação Acolhida" (Operation Welcome), which showcased the capacity for coordination among government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations (IOM, 2023). This experience can be adapted to support other nationalities, including Haitians.

Despite the existing legal framework, many initiatives fail to materialize due to a lack of political prioritization or changes in government. Migration issues are not always included in the agendas of federal,

state, or municipal administrations. The capacity to serve refugees varies greatly across regions; while some cities offer institutional services and support, others lack any infrastructure focused on immigrants. The implementation of public policies depends on funding. Many actions are carried out with the support of international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM, and the absence of dedicated budgets at the local government level is a major barrier to implementing integration measures. However, with strategic management, Brazil has the potential to become a reference in refugee reception and integration.

V. Conclusion

The analysis of the data and the theoretical reflections developed in this study reveal that the integration of vulnerable Haitian refugees in Brazil is a complex, multifactorial process conditioned by structural variables, such as educational level, language barriers, and social integration. Nationality emerges as a significant marker of inequality, as evidenced by lower social integration indices among Haitians when compared to Venezuelans.

Through the lens of Complexity Theory, it becomes evident that these challenges cannot be analyzed in isolation, but must be understood as part of an interconnected system of mutually reinforcing factors. For instance, low educational attainment hinders access to language learning and formal employment opportunities, while the absence of social ties and the prevalence of prejudice hinder refugees' sense of belonging and their full participation in the host society.

The literature review and analysis of secondary data from both international and national sources demonstrate that, although public policies aimed at refugee populations do exist, they remain insufficient to meet the specific needs of Haitian refugees, who face particular barriers in their adaptation process. In light of this, the implementation of effective integration strategies requires the strengthening of intersectoral policies, investment in Portuguese language education, the expansion of professional training opportunities, and the promotion of antidiscrimination initiatives. Moreover, it is imperative to ensure the active participation of refugees themselves in the planning and implementation of such measures.

Thus, integrating Haitian refugees should not be regarded merely as a logistical or welfare challenge, but as an ethical, political, and social commitment to human rights, social justice, and democratic coexistence. Only through coordinated actions that are sensitive to the complexity of the migratory phenomenon can a truly inclusive and supportive society be built.

It may be concluded that the implementation of public policies aimed at the adaptation and integration of Haitian refugees in Brazil is not only feasible and necessary, but also strategically relevant for the strengthening of democracy and social justice in the country. Rather than being limited to emergency or welfare measures, these policies must be understood as part of a structural commitment by the Brazilian State to human rights, equity, and the appreciation of cultural diversity.

Brazil has a robust legal framework, positive institutional experiences, and consolidated support networks that demonstrate its capacity to welcome and integrate populations in situations of forced displacement. The Haitian community, in particular, represents a group with significant potential to contribute to the

social, economic, and cultural development of various Brazilian regions. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including regional inequalities, resource scarcity, language barriers, and discriminatory practices, which must be addressed through coordinated intersectoral actions.

The integration of Haitian refugee's demands more than mere access to basic rights: it requires the recognition of their dignity, personal histories, and capabilities. In this process, the Brazilian State reaffirms its adherence to democratic and humanitarian principles, as enshrined in both its Constitution and the international treaties to which it is a party. Effective public policies must therefore promote the active inclusion of these individuals, not merely as beneficiaries, but as rights-holders and participants in the social and economic life of the country.

Accordingly, by investing in consistent integration strategies, Brazil not only fulfills its legal and ethical obligations but also enriches its own social fabric by incorporating new perspectives, knowledge, and forms of expression that contribute to a more pluralistic and resilient society. Intercultural coexistence, when mediated by just public policies, becomes an opportunity for collective growth and for the strengthening of citizenship for all.

Therefore, this study reaffirms that public integration policies are entirely viable in the current Brazilian context, provided they are supported by political will, adequate planning, and social participation. By viewing Haitian refugees not as a problem, but as part of the solution, Brazil can move toward a more inclusive, supportive, and sustainable development model.

The formulation and implementation of public policies for the reception of Haitian refugees is of fundamental importance, particularly in light of the historical and structural challenges faced by this population. Since the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti, thousands of Haitians have been forced to leave their country in search of better living conditions, safety, and dignity. However, upon arrival in destination countries such as Brazil and Chile, they often face language barriers, discrimination, and difficulties integrating into the labor market. Appropriate public policies can mitigate these difficulties and promote humanitarian and inclusive reception.

One of the key aspects of reception policies is migration regularization. The granting of humanitarian visas, as occurred in Brazil, is a crucial measure to ensure that Haitian refugees can legally reside in the country and access basic rights such as healthcare, education, and employment. Furthermore, policies that facilitate access to documentation, the recognition of educational qualifications, and integration into the educational system are essential for these individuals to rebuild their lives with dignity and autonomy.

Another important element of such policies is the promotion of social and cultural integration of Haitian refugees. Local language programs, intercultural activities, and anti-xenophobia campaigns are effective strategies to foster social interaction and reduce prejudice. Cultural integration does not imply forced assimilation but rather the respect for and appreciation of diversity, allowing Haitians to preserve their traditions while actively participating in the society that hosts them.

Therefore, it is essential that public policies for the reception of Haitian refugees be formulated in an intersectoral and participatory manner, involving various levels of government, civil society organizations, international bodies, and the refugees themselves. In doing so, the measures adopted will be more effective, respectful of human rights, and tailored to the real needs of this population. Humane and dignified reception is not merely a moral obligation — it is also an opportunity to strengthen democratic values and social cohesion in host countries.

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