When you live in favelas, you don’t just fight with the police, you fight everything. You close your eyes, and you wake up, you may be in the middle of an incursion, you may be in a turf war. It’s very complicated indeed ... you live in this eternal fear of something happening.

(Ludmila, Maré)

I think that when we’re outside Brazil, we’re more vulnerable ... when I was in Brazil, I had my family, my friends, but here I don’t have anyone ... here you’re on your own. That is what I noticed with my husband; he took advantage of that because he knew I had nowhere to go.

(Marcia, London)

This chapter situates gendered urban violence in the specific contexts of Maré in Rio de Janeiro and in London. In both these settings, we outline some key aspects of the population in general and give an overview of their experiences of direct forms of gender-based violence, drawing on the surveys in the respective places. In addition to highlighting the endemic nature of such violence, the discussion illustrates its multidimensionality and simultaneity. Reflecting the core components of the translocational gendered urban violence framework discussed in Chapter 1, this chapter sets the scene for how these direct forms interrelate with indirect structural, symbolic and infrastructural violence.

The discussion also outlines legislative and policy initiatives that aim to address gendered urban violence. Although violence against women was largely ignored by states globally in terms of laws and action until the 1990s, since then, and with considerable pressure from local, national and transnational feminist movements, allies
within the human rights movement and some politicians, many
governments around the world, including Brazil and the UK,
have begun to reform their legislation and institute policy change
to combat it (Htun and Jensenius, 2022). From a translocational
perspective, the UK has a lot to learn from feminists in Latin
America who have been at the forefront of lobbying for legisla-
tion criminalising feminicide, with eighteen Latin American coun-
tries having specific laws against it (Wilson et al., 2021). Yet, many
have argued that impunity remains rife and that the existence of
legal frameworks does not guarantee prevention of violence against
women. This is partly because radical and effective reform needs to
address intersectional systems of power that reproduce patriarchal
violence. Indeed, legal and judicial initiatives only address one of
the three dimensions identified in the Belém do Pará Convention: the
need to punish, ignoring the need to expose and the need to prevent
(Thomson and Muñoz Cabrera, 2022). More recently, however,
there has been guarded optimism in the Latin American context. In
Mexico, Htun and Jensenius (2022) argue that even weakly enforced
laws, together with feminist activism and media coverage, can reduce
gender-based and especially intimate partner abuse (Ellsberg et al.,
2022 on Nicaragua).

Gendered urban violence in Maré

As noted briefly in the introduction, Maré is located in the North
Zone of Rio de Janeiro and comprises a group of sixteen favelas
that began to be occupied in the 1940s. Women make up 51 per
cent of the population and many residents have low (albeit
increasing) levels of education, with many working in informal or
self-employment as street vendors or domestic workers within a
thriving entrepreneurial culture. Over half of the population self-
identify as being parda (of mixed heritage, or ‘Brown’), one-third as
White and less than one in ten as Black (Sousa Silva, 2017).

Nevertheless, high levels of inequality, poverty and public inse-
curity affect the lives of Maré residents, as does the lack of public
safety and security. Daily life is marked by ever-increasing levels
of violence perpetrated by the police and by armed militias and
drug gangs, although this violence plays out differently in distinct
Gendered urban violence among Brazilians

communities inside the territory. Maré is dominated by three of Rio de Janeiro’s armed criminal groups (ACGs): Comando Vermelho (Red Command), Terceiro Comando (Third Command) and the Milícia, made up of current and former public security agents (Silva Sousa, 2017). In past decades, Maré has become the arena of constant raids by the police and the military police (called ‘operations’ or ‘interventions’) which aim to curb the power of the armed groups and detain individual suspects of criminal activities. In practice, these lead to the serious injury and killing of civilians along with the suspension of normal daily activities. In 2016, for instance, thirty-three raids took place, resulting in seventeen dead and the closure of public agencies for twenty days. This death count was eight times more than for the whole of Brazil and three times higher than for the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2015 (Krenzinger et al., 2018b). Between 2017 and 2021, there were 132 police operations and 114 confrontations among armed groups. These resulted in 157 deaths, ninety-four days of closure of health centres and seventy days of closure of schools in Maré (Redes da Maré, 2021). In 2022 alone, there were twenty-seven police operations, resulting in thirty-nine deaths, fifteen days of school closures and nineteen days of health centre closures (Redes da Maré, 2022b). Paradoxically, this violence becomes self-reinforcing and perpetuates stereotypes about favelas as inherently violent spaces of the city. Also important is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian Supreme Court ordered the police forces to cease raiding favelas from July 2020. While the order was never entirely complied with, there was a marked reduction in numbers of police incursions in the second semester of 2020, resulting in a decrease in deaths in Maré by 61 per cent from 2019 figures. However, during the first half of 2021, there were more deaths caused by the police (eight) than in the entire year of 2020, despite having only seven incursions. An estimated 800 COVID vaccines were not offered to the local population due to disruptions caused in health centres during the 2021 incursions (Redes da Maré, 2021).

As the state has largely abdicated its obligations regarding the provision of public services and guaranteeing citizen rights, armed militias have come to fill the vacuum. They have taken control over the governance of the territories of Maré which the police have attempted to wrestle from them in a violent manner.
Situating gendered urban violence

(Krenzinger et al., 2018a; Silva Sousa, 2017). This combined institutional violence and action by armed groups disproportionately affects women. Between 2021 and 2022, Redes da Maré noted that women survivors of gender-based violence was the largest group they have supported (41 per cent of the total) followed by Black men (22 per cent). In terms of the perpetrators, 29 per cent of violence was by family members and neighbours, but 27 per cent was by public security forces and 22 per cent by armed groups (Redes da Maré, 2022a: 2). At the same time, historically, women have been the protagonists in the territory by leading many of the crucial struggles that have achieved so much, including mobilisations to obtain running water and to ensure the right to crèches in the 1980s. This emerged in our research, as Rita, a nineteen-year-old preta woman, noted:

I started to research the history of Maré and I noticed that it all began with a group of women. Ms Helena told me the story of her and her friends fighting for water and electricity ... The women are here while the men go out to work. We stay here, on the frontline. When there’s a police operation, it’s the women who go and defend [the community] ... Women have a key role in making the favela.

Who are women in Maré? Our survey revealed that two out of three were aged forty-four or younger, one-fifth were aged forty-five–fifty-nine and women aged sixty or older made up 14 per cent of the sample. Three out of five were born in Rio de Janeiro, two-fifths of whom were born in Maré. Nearly two-fifths were born outside of the state of Rio de Janeiro, with four-fifths of those migrating to Maré, predominantly from the northeast of Brazil. In terms of education, the overall picture was of low-level schooling. About two-fifths of women had not completed primary school, and only three out of ten had gone to secondary school. Nearly half self-identified as pardá, three out of ten self-identified as branca and one in five as preta. In terms of religious affiliation, two-fifths were Catholics, three out of ten were evangelical and nearly one in ten had no religion. Most women were married or in a stable relationship (over two-fifths), over one-third were single, one out of ten were separated or divorced and nearly one out of ten were widows. Just over one-fifth of the women were employed, another fifth worked on their own account, usually running a small business, and another fifth were out of work. Those not in paid work were
homemakers (one-fifth), had retired (one in ten) or were students (2 per cent) (Krenzinger et al., 2018a).

In terms of direct forms of gender-based violence, awareness emerged as limited. Although 76 per cent said that gender-based violence occurred in Maré, only 29 per cent openly declared that they suffered it. However, when asked about twelve specific forms of violence, this number rose to 57 per cent of those surveyed, indicating that they had suffered one or more forms of gender-based violence (34 per cent physical, 30 per cent sexual and 45 per cent psychological). While psychological violence was the most commonly identified, numbers are likely to be underestimated. A community leader from a focus group commented: ‘When violence is psychological, the woman takes much longer to understand that it is violence. Words also hurt’. Similarly, a service provider noted: ‘Many women do not realise that they experience situations of violence, so through group activities, they become aware of their situation’.

Threats of physical violence (27 per cent) as well as sexual comments (26 per cent) were the most common specific types of violence, in addition to physical violence (24 per cent). As for perpetrators, intimate partners committed almost half of the violence (47 per cent) and strangers 15 per cent. The remainder was committed by work colleagues and friends and family. Within Maré, women in the Milícia-controlled area and with the fewest non-governmental organisations (NGOs) reported lower levels of gendered violence, suggesting that they were potentially afraid to discuss the issue or were less aware of it, although this varied according to the specific favela (McIlwaine et al., 2023b; see Figure 3.1). Reporting also varied according to whether violence occurred in the public (53 per cent) or private (47 per cent) spheres.

The group most likely to experience gender-based violence were young people between eighteen and twenty-nine years old (almost 35 per cent) and women between thirty and forty-four years old (34 per cent). Those who identified as preta were the most likely to experience it (69 per cent), compared with 55 per cent of those who were parda and 50 per cent of branca women. Especially important to emphasise is that reports of gender-based violence were hugely diverse in nature, and different types were experienced simultaneously. According to the survey, among those who experienced violence, 38 per cent suffered one to three types, while 33 per cent suffered four or more, suggesting a tendency of re-victimisation.
Figure 3.1 Incidence of gender-based violence by favela and public/private sphere in Maré (per cent) (credit: cartography by Steven Bernard; adapted from McIlwaine et al., 2023b)
For example, twenty-nine-year-old Melissa, who was *preta*, had been sexually and physically abused by her stepfather as well as beaten by her second partner who broke two of her fingers and toes with a wooden stick. This partner also mocked and humiliated her on a regular basis. Melissa had a stepbrother who had been killed at fifteen by a stray bullet in an armed fight in the favela. Melissa reported constant sexual harassment in the street. Indeed, several women interviewed spoke of relatives being shot and/or killed in the violence that was commonplace in Maré. For example, fifty-two-year-old Lúcia, who was *preta* and had lived in Maré from the age of three, spoke of how her first partner and father of her twins was murdered by the police when they were only one year old. Subsequently, one of her twin sons was shot by military police who entered the favela as part of the UPP (Pacifying Police Unit) (Sousa Silva, 2017). The police claimed that they shot him because the car in which he was travelling did not stop at a checkpoint (denied by her son). Lúcia said that it was an ‘execution’ that left her son in hospital for ninety-eight days, paraplegic and with one leg amputated. The trauma of such violence on women has emerged as a major issue in favelas (Rocha, 2012; Smith, 2016).

The complexity and multidimensionality of gender-based violence can also be seen in a sequence from *SCAR* where different layers of video showing multiple women’s testimonies are projected on to the walls of the installation (Heritage, 2018b).

*Sequence 1 (four women speak and are seen)*

25
Every night I dream the same thing.

26
Meanwhile I was
physically abused

27
by my uncle.

28
At the time,
He was thirty years old out there,
and I was 15.

10 to 12.

It went on for ten years until …

Until I was 16

Because I lived with my aunt.

I loved her
and I didn’t tell her.

My stepfather abused me.

But I didn’t know,
I thought I was dreaming.

My husband’s godmother

He started abusing me.

He’d put his hand
In my mouth.

He started abusing me.

He made me do things,
Gendered urban violence among Brazilian migrant women in London

 Brazilians in London, as already noted, are not only the largest nationality group among Latin Americans in the UK but are estimated to be the largest of all Brazilian communities in Europe. In the last three decades or so, migration to the UK has increased markedly following the implementation of neoliberal macroeconomic policies throughout Latin America that have fuelled inequality, prompting movement in search of better economic and educational opportunities. According to one of the largest surveys with Brazilians in the UK, 92 per cent resided in England and Wales, and among those in England, more than half lived in London (Evans, 2020). This survey also verified a high educational level, bearing in mind that many Brazilians go to England for university and postgraduate studies, with 75 per cent having a university degree. This is reflected in the fact that 28 per cent were employed as professionals, with a further 16 per cent freelancers...
and business owners. Despite this, and linked with immigration status and English language proficiency, 41 per cent worked in so-called low-skilled jobs: in cleaning, food and beverage services and delivery services. In terms of immigration status, the majority (63 per cent) had a European passport, with 14 per cent having no documents (Evans, 2020: 15). The majority of Brazilians (57 per cent) came from the southeast region of Brazil, specifically, São Paulo. Acknowledging the contested nature of ethnic/racial identities, three-quarters self-reported as branca and 19 per cent as parda (Evans, 2020: 9). Racial identification among Brazilian migrants in London is especially complex, with those identifying as branca often finding it easier to migrate yet becoming ‘othered’ in intersectional and colonial representations of race, class and gender after they arrive. This can be especially difficult for Brazilian women given widespread racialised exoticisation and hyper-sexualisation (Martins Junior, 2020).

The lives of Brazilian migrants must also be situated within a wider context of a ‘hostile immigration environment’ in the UK. Since 2010, migrants’ rights have been systematically eroded with the aim of discouraging migration and settlement. Since 2012, punitive powers have been strengthened through the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts that have extended immigration controls to banks, the healthcare system, schools, private landlords and others. This has fundamentally undermined migrants’ access to work, education, accommodation and healthcare, especially for migrant women with insecure immigration status, and for survivors of gender-based violence (McIlwaine et al., 2019). For those with insecure immigration status, this relates specifically to the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) restriction linked to many temporary visas, which means they are unable to apply for state benefits or assistance. Although there are some concessions, NRPF conditions have generally been made more stringent over time (McIlwaine and Evans, 2023).

Therefore, Brazilian migrant women face a wide range of societal, economic and legal challenges in the UK, as reflected in the poem written collectively by the women from Migrants in Action (MinA):

I am a Brazilian woman ...
because they always ask me to dance samba
because they think I am exotic
because my body is sexualised.
I am a Brazilian woman
because they say that I came to Europe to find a husband and
his money.
I am a Brazilian woman because they say I am lazy
clean, clean, fast, fast.
I am a Brazilian woman because they think I am not capable, smart
or an intellectual
because they say I am ‘too much’, too loud
because they say I am not qualified
because they think I am stupid just because I am learning English.
I am a Brazilian woman and they say I can’t dream.

Yet, who are Brazilian women in London? According to our survey,
most were young (74 per cent were under fifty) and well educated
(72 per cent had university education). Almost three out of four
identified themselves as *branca*, and one out of five self-identified as
*parda*. Only a very small proportion identified as being Asian, Black
or Indigenous (4 per cent or below in all cases). Almost half moved
from São Paulo state (42 per cent), with 10 per cent from Rio de
Janeiro. Most had migrated directly from Brazil (two-thirds), but
one-third had lived outside Brazil prior to moving to London, espe-
cially in Italy, the US and Portugal. Brazilian women’s immigration
status varied, with about two-thirds entering with temporary visas
and the rest entering with European passports. The largest group
comprised those who had entered the UK holding a European pass-
port obtained through ancestry rights. Only a very small proportion
of women (3 per cent) reported becoming undocumented, although
this likely represents an underestimate. Importantly, 80 per cent
had regularised their status by the time of the survey (primarily
through obtaining EU passports). However, two-thirds had some
experience of insecure immigration status. Around three out of ten
of the women had moved to the UK to study, and nearly one in four
had migrated in search of adventure or new cultural experiences.
Nearly one-fifth had moved in search of work and one out of ten to
accompany their partner.

As for household and family, the majority (70 per cent) were
married/in relationships, with just over half having children. Most
were engaged in paid work (over two-thirds), with a majority
employed formally (nearly half), although some were self-employed or working informally (25 per cent). One in ten were students or homemakers and only a minority were out of work (seven per cent). Nearly half were working in ‘professional’ or ‘semi-professional occupations’ (i.e. requiring advanced training and education), and nearly one out of ten were managers or directors. One in five were working in caring and other services, with 14 per cent employed as cleaners. Yet, although many Brazilian women worked in professional or skilled occupations, mean and median salaries were lower than those for the UK more broadly (Evans and McIlwaine, 2017).

In relation to direct forms of gender-based violence, many women spoke of not recognising such abuse. Marcia, who was forty-two and identified as *preta*, noted:

> I picked up a leaflet that explained what it was. All these years, twenty-two years, I didn’t think I was suffering domestic violence, except for the time when he punched me. But when I read the information on the leaflet, I was shocked to find that I had spent half my life suffering psychological, emotional abuse, without realising it. I didn’t understand what I was living with.

While some women were unaware, others were unwilling to acknowledge that they were experiencing violence, usually due to manipulation by their partners. Others spoke of how they had been brought up in Brazil thinking that violence was normal. For example, Valentina, who was in her forties and *branca*, stated: ‘I didn’t even realise that it was violence as I was used to hearing the stories from my grandmother, from my mother, my cousins and my sisters who went through this; for me, that wasn’t even abuse, it was normal; for me, it was part of every marriage’.

Bearing this in mind, an alarmingly high 82 per cent of Brazilian women reported experiences of abuse in their lifetime. Psychological violence emerged as most commonly experienced (48 per cent), followed by physical (38 per cent) and sexual (14 per cent). Unwelcome physical contact was the most frequent specific form (42 per cent), as well as physical assault (36 per cent) and being humiliated or suffering discrimination (33 per cent). The majority of perpetrators were known to women (66 per cent); although one-third of violence was committed by strangers, almost a quarter (23 per cent) was by an intimate partner, with bosses and
colleagues in workplaces responsible for 26 per cent and friends and family for 10 per cent. In terms of where the violence took place, 23 per cent occurred in the private sphere (22 per cent in the victim’s home and 8 per cent in someone else’s) with 78 per cent in the public domain. Those with mixed heritage/parda were more likely to suffer (66 per cent) than White/branca women (58 per cent) (remembering that only 2 per cent of the survey sample were Black/preta). Furthermore, the survey revealed that gender-based violence was higher among those with insecure and temporary immigration status (60 per cent) compared with those with permanent status (mainly an EU passport) (54 per cent) (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018, 2023).

Just as in Maré, Brazilian women in London experienced a wider variety of forms of direct violence both simultaneously and over their lifetimes. According to the survey, 29 per cent of women experienced one form of violence, while 26 per cent experienced two, and 24 per cent suffered three types. One woman, Cristina, who was thirty-seven, White and worked as a cleaner, had experienced twenty-one different types of direct forms of gender-based violence, including being kicked, slapped, coercively controlled, throttled, defamed, stalked and threatened with a knife and scissors, all at the hands of her partner.

Reflecting the discrimination facing Brazilian women in British society, this was particularly intense when women had insecure immigration status. For example, Isabela (included in the Step Up Migrant Women (SUMW) research) spoke of how her British ex-husband and his family abused her because she was undocumented:

I came to the UK in 2015 from Brazil. I was convinced by my British ex-husband that I had a spousal visa, but he had refused to apply for one as soon as I arrived in the UK. I continued to undergo domestic violence from my then husband who threatened me repeatedly with deportation. He hid my passport and documents from me. He reported me to social services and told them I was being the abusive one towards our children. I was undocumented and feared being reported to the police. He and his mother hid my passport from me, and he told me I would never be believed and that he would take our children away from me. I was refused support from the police and was made homeless and destitute. I was also told I had no custody over my child because I was undocumented.
Brazilian migrant women also experienced gender-based violence across a transnational continuum (McIlwaine and Evans, 2020). Indeed, 77 per cent had experienced it in Brazil prior to migrating, with 52 per cent having suffered back home experiencing it again in London. There was therefore continuity across borders, with 43 per cent suffering in both locations (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018). Yet, there is nothing innate in Brazilian culture that means that such violence travels with women. Instead, the nature of gender-based violence is reconfigured as women negotiate life in London as migrants. The chapter now turns to situate these profiles within the legislative and policy contexts in both countries.

**Addressing gender-based violence in Brazil through legislation and policy**

The last four decades have been pivotal in bringing about policy changes to address gender-based violence against women and girls in Brazil. Since the 1980s, Brazil has ratified fourteen treaties and conventions enforceable at the international, national or local levels that mandate the promotion of gender equality, the protection of women’s rights, the protection of victims of violence and the punishment of perpetrators (Gattegno et al., 2016). The feminist and women’s rights movements in Brazil have played a crucial role in this, demanding policies and measures from the government and society since the 1970s (Morgado et al., 2018). The social and political changes that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the period of military dictatorship and in the subsequent return to democratic government were also linked to feminist activism. Their mobilisation throughout the 1980s aimed at giving visibility to violence against women and demanding social, juridical and health policies, along with preventative measures. As these movements strengthened, they fought for the criminalisation of domestic violence to shift it from its historical confinement to the private sphere of the home into the public sphere (Morgado et al., 2018).

Their demands were translated into legal, judicial and institutional changes to address gender-based violence (Kiss et al., 2012). Major outcomes included Brazil ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1984.
This set out the national legal and regulatory structures for promoting gender equality and addressing violence against women. Women’s mobilisation also led to the creation of the National Council for Women’s Rights in 1985, responsible for formulating policies at all levels of public administration with a view to eliminating discrimination against women. This was followed by the establishment of local and regional participatory councils for women’s rights across the public administration (Macaulay, 2010, 2021).

Another important milestone in the 1980s was the establishment of the first ever Women’s Police Station in the city of São Paulo in 1985 to prevent, investigate and punish violence against women, following years of feminist group lobbying. These are specialised police units staffed predominantly with women police officers aiming to avoid problems of, for example, re-victimisation associated with ordinary police stations (Machado et al., 2018). By 2018, they comprised around 370 units established in 447 cities around the country, the highest number among Latin American countries (Córdova and Kras, 2020). Nevertheless, these are not without their criticisms, including their insufficient distribution across Brazilian cities, understaffing and existing staff rarely receiving gender-sensitising training (Perova and Reynolds, 2017).

Further legal-institutional milestones included Brazil’s ratification of the 1994 Inter-American Convention for the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (the Belém do Pará Convention) (Thomson and Muñoz Cabrera, 2022). This was significant in incorporating definitions of violence against women as well as criminalising it, particularly sexual violence (Martins, 2018). Another landmark was the creation of the national Secretariat for Policies for Women in 2003, which was successful in securing state funding of services for addressing violence against women (Perova and Reynolds, 2017). That same year, a new national law came into force making it mandatory for public and private health services to record and make publicly available all cases of gender-based violence among the women they assist, making violence a public health issue (Martins, 2018). Many of these gains were consolidated in the first National Plan for Women’s Policies (PNPM) created in 2004.

The Maria da Penha Law (2006) was a milestone in the development of legal measures to combat violence against women in
Brazil, increasing its visibility and encouraging women to report violence. Reflecting concerted lobbying by feminist groups, the law is named after a prominent campaigner and a survivor of domestic violence who brought a landmark case against the Brazilian state at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2001. This legislation effected changes in national criminal and penal codes, creating mechanisms for the punishment of perpetrators and the establishment of dedicated courts. It also mandated the creation of shelters for women at risk of domestic violence and led to the creation of a helpline service (Service Centre for Women – Ligue 180) and the National Pact for Combatting Violence against Women in 2007 (Morgado et al., 2018). Although the implementation of the Maria da Penha Law has played an integral role in increasing awareness of violence against women, its effectiveness has been compromised by a lack of state resources, making it difficult to fully implement (Gattegno et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2016).

Further violence against women policies and programmes were developed during the 2010s, including the Network for Ending Violence against Women in 2011 aiming to develop strategies to prevent violence against women and girls. Another important initiative was the Women Living Without Violence programme which, in turn, created the Brazilian Women’s House project in 2013 (Lima et al., 2016). Within the decade, another milestone in the fight against violence against women was set by the Feminicide Law implemented in 2015. This made gender-based murder of women an aggravated form of homicide which was added to the list of heinous crimes, thereby increasing its visibility and enabling the punishment of perpetrators with prison sentences from twelve to thirty years. The new law has increased the visibility of feminicide and helped bolster the implementation of the Maria da Penha Law (Lima et al., 2016). A further development in criminal law was the 2018 Sexual Importunation Law which makes committing a libidinous act against someone’s will and without their consent in public space a crime, attracting prison sentences between one and five years (Faria Filho, 2019). However, despite expanding the national response to gender-based violence, the landmark legal frameworks primarily focus on punitive strategies rather than preventative measures.
In a short period of time, Brazil established key institutional architectures to address women’s rights in an integrated and participatory way. However, in 2018, in the context of President Bolsonaro’s political reorientation of the country away from its previous progressive advancements, the National Secretary for Women was transferred to a newly instituted Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights. This was assumed to be an upgrade for the women’s rights agenda but, in fact, feminist movements revealed it as a throwback, particularly considering the appointment of an anti-feminist, Neo-Pentecostal leader with a strong opposition to so-called ‘gender ideology’ as Minister. With the inauguration of President Lula da Silva in January 2023, women’s equality has moved centre stage. He appointed the largest number of female ministers in the history of Brazil (sixteen out of thirty-seven). On International Women’s Day on 8 March 2023, he announced a host of policies to address wage inequalities, fight gender-based violence and guarantee reproductive health rights. Among other initiatives, he relaunched the Live Without Violence programme, aimed to build forty ‘Brazilian Women’s Houses’ which would provide specialised support for women survivors of violence and established ‘Marielle Franco Day’ (on 14 March, the anniversary of the municipal councillor of Rio de Janeiro’s murder in 2018) with the aim of preventing intersectional political violence. It remains to be seen how these initiatives will play out, but they are a clear departure from the racialised and classed misogyny of Bolsonaro and his administration.

Addressing gender-based violence in the UK through legislation and policy

As was the case in Brazil, over the last few decades, the UK has signed up to major treaties and conventions on gender-based violence against women and girls, enforceable at the international and regional levels. It has also created a host of national policies to protect and support women survivors, sanction perpetrators and prevent violence. However, there is no single comprehensive British legislation that addresses all forms of violence against women and girls, so laws and policies address specific forms, with domestic violence being the most commonly addressed.
Since the late 1960s, women's movements in the UK have mobilised for women's rights, pioneering attempts to place domestic violence on the policy agenda and pressurising the government to address violence against women (Hearn et al., 2016). Their efforts were bolstered by the formalisation of gender equality rights that followed the UK joining the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. Women's movements in the UK helped inform important legislation, such as the landmark 1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, the first legislation that enabled women to secure protection from violence, and subsequent legislation containing relevant provisions for violence against women, such as the 1996 Family Law Act and the 1997 Protection from Harassment Act. They also helped create key initiatives like the national domestic violence helpline in 1987. From the 1990s onwards, central government has provided funding for an array of initiatives including appointing a Minister for Women with a supporting Women’s Unit, improving guidance for the police’s handling of domestic violence reporting and establishing guidelines for multi-agency cooperation to facilitate an integrated approach (Corradi and Stöckl, 2014).

In the 2000s, various pieces of legislation were passed containing provisions to advance women’s rights, to protect victims of diverse forms of violence against women, prevent such violence and punish its perpetrators. These include the 2003 Sexual Offences Act, the 2003 Female Genital Mutilation Act, the 2004 Gender Recognition Act, the 2006 Equality Act and the 2007 Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act. Marking a significant step forward, in 2004, the UK adopted the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act, which was informed by a consultation with the Women’s National Commission (an umbrella body for UK-based women’s groups to advise the government). While it was extremely significant at the time of its enactment, this Act fails to address the need for more comprehensive integrated initiatives to tackle social, health, housing, advocacy and employment issues related to domestic violence. Rather, it treats domestic violence primarily as a criminal matter focused on punishment (Hearn et al., 2016). Nonetheless, it has established some valuable initiatives, such as specialist domestic violence police units to support victims, a domestic violence courts system and accreditation of independent trained specialists to provide support to high-risk victims (Corradi and Stöckl, 2014).
In the 2010s, there was a notable acceleration in law creation, policy development and the design of mechanisms to regulate actions against gender-based violence. The 2010 Equality Act and the 2010 Crime and Security Act, together with the Call to End Violence against Women and Girls Strategy 2010, provided an overarching framework to address violence against women and girls. The latter strategy addresses crimes committed primarily by men against women including domestic abuse, rape, sexual offences, stalking, harassment, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, child abuse and human trafficking, with additional focus on sexual exploitation, prostitution, pornography and obscenity. An amendment of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act followed in 2012 to cover for acts causing or allowing serious physical harm or death of a child or vulnerable adult, while the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 created the specific offence of stalking. The following year, the cross-government definition of violence against women and girls was amended to take account of young people, cover coercive behaviour and include physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse (Corradi and Stöckl, 2014).

In 2014, the Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence) came into force, comprising eighty-one articles to address prevention, protection of victims, prosecution of perpetrators and integrated policies (HO, 2019). The UK signed up to the convention in 2012 but only ratified it in November 2022. Even then, it reserved Articles 44 and 59, which provide protection for migrant women. Article 44 relates to the prosecution of British citizens or residents for crimes committed outside the UK; Article 59 relates to protecting migrant victims of violence who have insecure immigration status, and have NRPF. SUMW has been central to lobbying around this, drawing on The Right to Be Believed research (McIlwaine et al., 2019; see Chapter 2). Underlying the ratification was the Domestic Abuse Bill 2019, which became an Act in 2021, which was required for compliance with the Istanbul Convention. This sets out a comprehensive package of actions meant to ‘transform’ the UK’s response to domestic violence to ensure that victims feel safe reporting and trust the state to support them and their children, as well as bringing perpetrators to justice (HO, 2020).
Alongside SUMW, advocacy groups have campaigned for years to have the issue of migrant women’s rights addressed by the government, arguing that this is a human rights and justice issue. As noted above by Isabela, research shows that women’s inability to obtain state support means they are trapped in enduring intimate partner violence (EVAW, 2020). Advocacy groups have warned that the Domestic Abuse Act fails to offer migrant women the protection they need, demanding that they be allowed to report violence free from the threat of incarceration and deportation through the creation of a ‘firewall’ between public services and immigration controls, and that such women be given leave to remain in the UK independently until their situation can be resolved (McIlwaine et al., 2019).

In London, efforts to address violence against women and girls gained impetus from the late 2000s, involving participation of local authorities, government agencies and voluntary and statutory organisations in the design and implementation of strategies led by the Mayor of London. The Way Forward (GLA, 2010) was launched early in the decade, comprising the first strategy and policy action to acknowledge violence against women and girls as both ‘a cause and consequence of gender inequality’ and ‘one of the most serious inequalities facing women and girls in London’ (GLA, 2010: 13). The strategy has been updated three times since, with the latest launched in 2022 covering 2022–25 and setting out four key priority areas: preventing and reducing violence against women and girls, holding perpetrators to account, supporting all victims and survivors and building trust and confidence in the police and criminal justice system (GLA, 2022).

Overlapping with SUMW is the London Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Consortium, a feminist and anti-racist coalition of twenty-eight specialist violence against women and girls support providers working across all thirty-two London boroughs. Set up in the early 2010s, it provides comprehensive specialist and generic services. A key initiative developed by the London VAWG Consortium in 2013 is Ascent. This offers frontline services to victims of domestic and sexual violence and supports voluntary and statutory organisations. However, while Ascent identifies immigration as a key focus area and works with Black and Minority Ethnic communities helping them to access support, migrant women with insecure immigration status often fall through the gaps of their support mechanisms (Evans and McIlwaine, 2017).
Addressing gender-based violence in Rio de Janeiro and London through service provision

While the legislative and policy context in both countries is integral to understanding general attitudes towards combatting gender-based violence, it is also important to explore how service providers on the ground support women survivors and the challenges in doing so. While this is examined more fully in Chapter 6, here we provide a brief overview of the organisational assistance available. This is essential in showing that well-developed legislative and policy frameworks do not always lead to funding and support for organisations and therefore improvements in the lives of women.

In Rio de Janeiro, there has been widespread criticism of existing state services for women survivors of gendered violence, with the situation in favelas being even more calamitous due to the historical and endemic state neglect in these territories (Fernandes et al., 2019). To start with, the locations and outreach of most public institutions that could support women facing violence are distant from Maré, often located in the city centre and often disengaged with the local challenges that these women face. The closest Women’s Police Station, for example, is located 11 km away from Maré. One service provider noted that this also involves time and money for transportation that many women cannot afford (Morgado et al., 2018). Drawing on a participatory map co-created by stakeholders from a women’s support organisation in Maré, it emerged that the state-led services on offer are limited to healthcare facilities which deal only with the effects of gender-based violence. Figure 3.2 shows their locations in and around Maré, with only one dedicated to women – the Centro de Referência de Mulheres da Maré Carminha Rosa/UFRJ (Carminha Rosa Women’s Reference Centre of Maré/UFRJ). In terms of the quality of services provided, several state-led organisations complained that they did not receive enough resources to employ staff, with one saying they could not afford a receptionist or cleaner and another reporting no internet access. In addition, many state-run services are not run by people from Maré and so they do not understand the internal dynamics of living there, as noted by a social worker: ‘Those who work in public services in Maré are people who don’t live in Maré, so, even though we try to tackle it, there is always going to be an uneven power dynamic between those who don’t live in Maré and those who do’.
Figure 3.2 Participatory mapping of service provision for women in Maré (adapted from McIlwaine et al., 2023b)
In contrast to scarce public institutions, Maré houses many NGOs and community organisations which fill the gap in providing various kinds of support encompassing psychosocial care, legal advice, education and professional training. These have been established in the face of state neglect and are not distributed evenly across the favelas of Maré (see Figure 3.2). One service provider noted: ‘We organise projects that tackle the absence of public policy and state services in the favelas [which] leads to the presence of armed groups and police incursions’. This, somewhat paradoxically, puts further pressure on the NGO sector to pick up the pieces from these armed urban conflicts that have serious implications for women’s wellbeing, both directly and indirectly.

In the participatory mapping, seventeen NGOs were identified, including nine community-based organisations, eight women-led initiatives (Figure 3.2) and an additional nine online groups. While some of the women-led initiatives were formally organised, many were informal collective groupings offering support for women experiencing gender-based violence. In 2020, in the context of COVID-19, the Support Network for Women in Maré (RAMM – Rede de Apoio às Mulheres da Maré) was initiated, identifying the need for networking and joint strategies among individuals and organisations to help women experiencing gender-based violence (McIlwaine et al., 2022a, 2022c, 2023a).

In London, there are a range of generalist and specialist providers of support for women survivors. Generalist providers offer a range of services to clients who may include survivors, while specialists offer services following specific criteria related to survivors’ nationality, ethnicity and language. These organisations are sometimes funded by the state and also support women in accessing statutory services (such as welfare benefits, health, education and housing services) as well as specific immigration, legal and counselling assistance. According to our service mapping, there are two relatively large organisations in London who support Latin American women specifically – our partners the LAWRS and Latin American Women’s Aid (LAWA), both of whom provide support for women victims and survivors of violence, with LAWA running the only refuge for Latin American women in the city. There is also one smaller organisation that works specifically with Brazilian women and includes support for survivors within their wider provision,
another that employs specialist violence against women services for Brazilian women and a final organisation that works with the Brazilian community and offers some general support for survivors. Besides these five, we also identified a further seven with experience of supporting women within the migrant and/or women’s sector. In addition, the Brazilian General Consulate in London offers an important dial-in service for women who are victims of domestic violence, sexual labour exploitation and international trafficking. Known as Dial 180 International, this is listed on the Consulate’s web page and refers survivors to support services in the UK (Evans and McIlwaine, 2017).

Since their creation, many of these and other organisations have reported an increase in demand for support over time from Brazilian women. For instance, one service provider noted: ‘the number went on increasing … In the beginning, I used to see about two or three per week, then it went on increasing, increasing, and now, I’ve had days when I see five women per day’. One provider working with Brazilian women reported supporting 162 Brazilian women between late 2013 and early 2017, with an increase of 35 per cent between 2015 and 2016 (Evans and McIlwaine, 2017).

Certain types of expertise were developed by organisations given that they were working with international migrants potentially vulnerable to exploitation. While most of the organisations spoke of offering support for women in cases of domestic abuse, six of them discussed international sex trafficking as an issue where they had to intervene. One such case involved a Brazilian woman in her early twenties who sought help having moved to London to purportedly work as a model. While the ‘agency’ paid for her papers and travel expenses, on arriving, she was forced into sex work for an Eastern European gang. Despite initially escaping, she was later kidnapped by the gang and imprisoned at a secret address where she was forced to work as a sex slave so the gang could recoup their ‘investment’. She eventually escaped after four years and received support from a specialist organisation, including after one of the gang members tracked her family down in Brazil. This service provider noted that ‘this is happening commonly’, and, as a result, she ran a programme of talks in Brazil as a form of prevention. There were also cases of less formalised sex trafficking such as a Brazilian woman whose Portuguese husband forced her into sex work after
arriving in London, hiding her passport, detaining her and making her work in the sex trade from their home. Even after receiving support, the police refused to define this as a case of trafficking and instead insisted it was domestic violence. Labour exploitation was also widespread; one provider spoke of a wealthy Brazilian woman who employed another Brazilian woman who was undocumented to do domestic work at her house. The worker lived at the family home but was lodged in an unheated shed outside, for which she had to pay rent that was ostensibly deducted from wages that she was never actually paid (Evans and McIlwaine, 2017).

Immigration status is key to the support that organisations are able to provide for Brazilian migrant women. Although providers generally did not make their support contingent on immigration status, being undocumented or with insecure status meant that women were, for the most part, ineligible to use statutory services. Their status as having NRPF also imposes restrictions on referral options, as explained by a service provider: ‘So sometimes I will ask them about their legal status, and say it is not important for me because we see everybody, but obviously, I can’t refer out to other services’. Several service providers raised the issue of refuges, as one noted:

The refuge will only take on people who have access to benefits, because it is the benefits that will pay for it, because refuges are generally very expensive, and if the person doesn’t have access to, can’t apply for housing benefit to be able to pay for the refuge, the refuge won’t take them in.

In Maré and London, service providers face multiple structural and systemic obstacles in supporting women survivors, with gendered infrastructural violence being widespread (Chapter 6).

Before moving on to Chapters 4 and 5, it is appropriate to finish with the words of Julia Leal, the Coordinator of Casa das Mulheres da Maré and one of our researchers, on the challenges of legislative change and the need to include the voices of the excluded and especially Black women:

I understand that women, particularly Black women, are the cogs that keep Brazilian society going. I think they are the people who work most to begin with ... If Black women in Brazil are the ones who suffer the most from gender-based violence, it is these women
that have to be there drawing up public policy, instead of the way it is currently being done, which is half a dozen White men in a room producing country laws.

This statement can be heard from Julia herself in our Women Resisting Violence podcast.3

Notes

1 The ethnic-racial classification in Brazil is based on self-declaration established by the Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The IBGE’s census uses five categories: White (branca), Brown (parda), Black (preta), Indigenous (indígena) and Asian (amarela). This categorisation has been contested but remains the most frequently used typology in Brazil. The use of the term ‘Black women’ (mulheres negras) refers to the amalgamation of the IBGE’s Black and Brown categories. When combined with ‘Indigenous’ and ‘yellow’, the term ‘non-White’ tends to be used, although this is also problematic (Krenzinger et al., 2021; McIlwaine and Evans, 2023).
