**Review Article**

**QUALITY OF LIFE AND HEALTH AND THE AGENCIES OF INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRANTS**

ABSTRACT

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| International immigration is a multidimensional phenomenon, with its causes reflecting political, economic, and cultural contexts, often related to forced displacement. This study was conducted through a narrative review, based on a critical analysis of scientific articles, institutional reports, and official documents that discuss the living conditions, health, and agency of immigrants. Immigrants face significant challenges that impact their quality of life and health, influenced by structural factors such as unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, language barriers, and restrictive immigration policies. The literature highlights that the health of these groups is affected not only by individual issues but also by broad social determinants, such as limited access to housing, unsafe jobs, and difficulty accessing essential public services. Despite these difficulties, immigrants develop strategies of resistance and adaptation, relying on solidarity networks to face daily challenges. However, these individual and collective initiatives do not replace the need for more inclusive public policies that guarantee basic rights and promote effective social integration. |

*Keywords:* Access to Health Services; Social Determinants of Health; International Migration; Health Vulnerabilities.

1. INTRODUCTION

International migration is a multidimensional phenomenon, with its causes reflecting political, economic, and cultural contexts. It is defined as the movement of people across international borders with the intention of settling, either temporarily or permanently, in a country other than their country of origin (IOM, 2019). In 2022, more than 280 million people lived outside their countries of origin, of whom 35,3 million were refugees (IOM, 2024). Of this total, approximately 29,4 million were under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while 5.9 million were Palestinians assisted by the United Nations agency (IOM, 2024).

Although immigration is a complex issue that requires specific analysis of the motivations and characteristics of each migratory flow, it can be said that, in the contemporary world, it is a structural phenomenon (Dias, 2020). This is because a large number of people immigrate by force, driven by factors related to coercion, in a displacement process that is not a free choice. In these cases, immigration is the only alternative to ensure the survival of individuals facing situations such as hunger, precarious income, unemployment, climate catastrophes, or political, religious, or ethnic persecution (Rossa; Menezes, 2018; Brandt *et al*., 2023). Many of these conditions are caused by inequalities and inequities that have historically originated from the exploitation of countries in the Global North that colonized countries in the Global South, as well as the current context of neoliberal economic globalization (Sassen, 2002; Dias, 2020; Brandt *et al*., 2023).

Until the end of the 19th century, immigration was considered a natural aspect of the human condition, with international borders open to the movement of people. However, with the emergence of nation-states, immigration became institutionalized, with criteria established that promoted a division between nationals and foreigners. Alongside this, an “institutional migration apparatus” was created, establishing laws, discourses, and administrative measures to ensure border control and protection, regulating who could and could not enter the country. As a result, immigration ceased to be viewed as a natural phenomenon and instead came to be seen as a problem to be managed by states (Dahiden, 2016). Since 2008, ideologies that portray immigration as criminal and as a problem to be controlled have intensified, especially in countries of the Global North. Consequently, these countries have adopted more restrictive immigration policies to protect their economies from “immigration threats” (Weintraub; Vasconcelos, 2013; Silva; Bógus; Silva, 2017).

Despite the outdated view that considers immigration a threat - leading to restrictive migration policies - it is important to note that immigration has not declined, as its underlying drivers remain. Countries, especially in the Global South, continue to face social, political, and economic inequalities, wars, conflicts, and environmental disasters, which compel their citizens to migrate (Sassen, 2002; IOM, 2024). These changes in migration laws have, in turn, influenced the direction of migration flows. For example, immigrants from the Global South, who traditionally migrated to the Global North, have had to redefine their routes, often choosing other pathways - particularly South-South routes - characterized by migration from underdeveloped countries to other underdeveloped countries (IOM, 2024).

Is also important to note that, whether in Global South or Global North countries, the political rise of far-right parties and their representatives has contributed to an increase in xenophobia and anti-immigration policies - particularly targeting “undesirable” immigrants, often characterized as coming from poor and racialized countries (OPEB, 2024). The rhetoric used by these conservative leaders, which blames migrants for economic crises, poverty, and social inequalities, is absorbed by the native population. This has led not only to electoral support for such parties but also to xenophobic attitudes and even physical violence against immigrants (Costa, 2012).

This way, it is possible to observe the inequalities and inequities faced by immigrants throughout the migration process. These challenges range from unsafe and irregular migratory routes - often taken to bypass restrictive policies - to the presence of reception contexts that do not ensure their integration as full citizens with access to rights. Therefore, upon crossing the borders of their destination countries, immigrants encounter several obstacles, such as difficulties in obtaining visas and documentation, precarious integration into the labor market - where they frequently occupy informal and subordinate jobs - and often receive insufficient income to meet their basic needs (Leão *et al*., 2017; Eberhardt *et al*., 2018; Aragão *et al*., 2023). Additionally, they face exclusion or precarious inclusion in essential services like health, education, and social assistance (Chang, 2019; Gagnon *et al*., 2022).

On the other hand, it’s also important to understand how international immigrants develop strategies of resistance, adaptation, and survival in their destination countries. Although they are often portrayed solely as victims of structural inequalities, these individuals also take actions that showcase their capacity for agency, creativity, and resilience (Hall, 2003). The agency of immigrants can play a key role in their adaptation to the new country, helping them to overcome the barriers and vulnerable situations mentioned earlier.

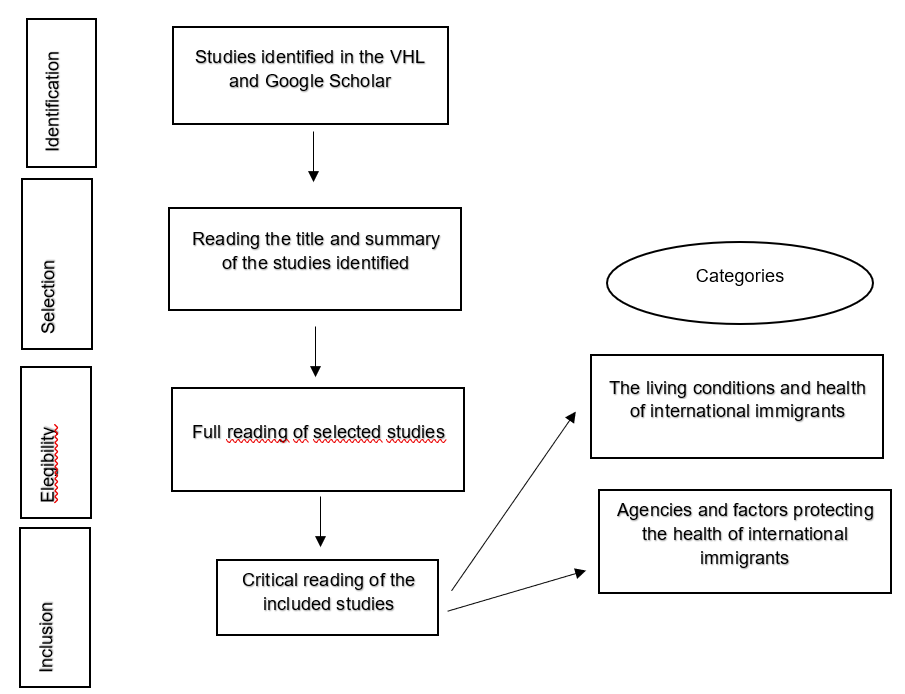
This study aims to describe the living and health conditions of international immigrants within their host society, as well as their capacity for agency. Its importance lies in its potential to spark discussions that can inform and strengthen public policies for the international immigrant population. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for more effective action by the State through intersectoral initiatives that promote inclusion, combat discrimination, and uphold human rights - contributing to the development of a just, pluralistic, and welcoming society.

2. methodology

To achieve the proposed objective, a Narrative Review (NR) was employed as the methodology. This approach focuses on describing and discussing the subject theoretically and contextually, based on an analysis of literature published in books and scientific articles. Unlike systematic reviews, this type of review is more flexible regarding the processes of searching, selecting, and including materials (Rother, 2007). The review was conducted between March and June 2025, using scientific articles published in Portuguese, Spanish, and English, available on Google Scholar and the Virtual Health Library (VHL). The included articles addressed the living and health conditions of international immigrants, as well as their agency. Additionally, studies by leading authors on the topic, which were already known to the researchers, were also incorporated.

The selected studies were read in full, with their most relevant findings on the topic highlighted, similarities grouped, and disagreements discussed. The results were organized into two categories. The first focused on the living conditions of these immigrants, especially in the host country, and how these conditions can impact their quality of life and health. The second category addressed the agency and other factors that can help improve the quality of life for international immigrants and protect them from the adverse conditions they face in the host society. Figure 1 illustrates the development and systematization process of this Narrative Review.

**Figure 1.** Search strategies and inclusion of articles included in the research



3. results and discussion

**3.1 The Living conditions and health international immigrants**

The results of this study reveal that immigrants face adverse conditions that directly impact their quality of life and health. Migrant health involves factors that precede departure, interact with the migration process, and persist during their integration into the host society. Additionally, the authors emphasize the importance of immigrant health assessments that consider aspects of intersectionality – such as gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and structural racism – as cumulative health vulnerabilities (Costa; Gurgel; Matos, 2020). Therefore, immigrant health is not determined solely by individual factors and lifestyle habits but is especially influenced by structural determinants (Ventura; Yujra, 2022).

Immigrants from countries in the Global South - considered developing or underdeveloped nations—tend to migrate due to inequalities, precarious living conditions, and various rights violations that affect them in their home countries. Consequently, factors such as hunger, low income, unemployment, lack of access to healthcare, political, religious, and ethnic persecution, as well as various forms of violence, often strongly influence the decision to migrate, leading these individuals to be forced to leave their countries of origin (Haydu *et al*., 2020; Vargas; Shimizu; Monteiro, 2023; Cespedes *et al*., 2024). This situation of forced migration, occurring without prior planning or preparation, exposes migrants to unsafe and irregular journeys. As a result, the migration process itself becomes fraught with risks, including violence (Santos, 2016; *Borges et al*., 2018), death, and deprivation of sleep and food (Cespedes *et al*., 2024).

In the destination country, the literature presents a consensus regarding the health impacts on immigrants, particularly due to the living and working conditions they encounter during their integration. Given its significance, this aspect will be the focus of analysis in this study. Based on the reviewed literature, it is evident that certain immigrant profiles tend to be more stigmatized and vulnerable within host countries than others. Immigrants from countries in the Global South who migrate to other countries in the Global South or to those in the Global North often experience poorer integration conditions (Ventura; Yujra, 2022). Additionally, non-white immigrants generally face more precarious integration compared to white immigrants (Branco-Pereira, 2019).

Immigrants from the Global South often reside in vulnerable and segregated communities characterized by high crime rates and a lack of public safety (Neto; Oliveira; Egry, 2023). In these areas, housing is often precarious in terms of infrastructure, lacking basic sanitation and access to quality water, and is frequently shared among multiple individuals, many of whom are not related (Fernandez-Niño *et al*., 2018; Haydu *et al*., 2020). The overcrowding observed in immigrant housing highlights the housing deficit present in society, whereby individuals with lower socioeconomic status face greater difficulties accessing adequate shelter (Weber *et al*., 2019). The unsanitary conditions of these environments, often small, poorly ventilated, damp, and shared by many, contribute to increased exposure to infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy, influenza, and other viral and respiratory illnesses (Fernandez-Niño *et al*., 2018; Haydu *et al*., 2020).

Working conditions are among the primary challenges faced by immigrants. In the host country, these individuals are often confined to jobs requiring low levels of professional qualification, which are frequently rejected by native workers due to their precarious nature. This exposes migrant workers to occupations with high occupational risks, leading to injuries and illnesses (Leão *et al*., 2017; Eberhardt *et al*., 2018). These workplaces often feature unhealthy working conditions characterized by significant physical and mental strain, high injury rates, inadequate training, and a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and safety training necessary for protection (Eberhardt *et al*., 2018; Demétrio; Baeninger, 2023). The low wages associated with these jobs further hinder socioeconomic mobility and limit access to basic needs such as food and housing. This scenario underscores how even formal labor markets operate in an exclusionary manner, relegating immigrants to subordinate positions (Leão *et al*., 2017; Eberhardt *et al*., 2018).

In some countries, such as Brazil, the migration of impoverished populations is part of a directed migration process, whereby the state and the productive sector attract vulnerable immigrant workers to meet labor demands for economic benefit. This phenomenon reveals the coercive nature of these migrations, which, although often classified as economic migrations, are in practice influenced by external factors that serve as pressure points in migration decisions. Consequently, immigrants do not freely choose their destination; rather, migration occurs primarily due to the availability and possibility of being welcomed in a country capable of providing formal employment (Demétrio; Baeninger, 2023).

In this context, we can cite the author Sayad (1998), who posits that international immigrants are welcomed in their destination countries solely as workers. Consequently, they are restricted to performing only the jobs assigned to them, which are almost always characterized by precarious conditions. Furthermore, their value is limited to their social contribution as laborers, and they are tolerated in society only insofar as they can contribute through their work (Sayad, 1998).

In the realm of working conditions, it is possible to observe the presence of unemployment among immigrants (Aragão *et al*., 2023) and their integration into the informal labor market, where there is a predominance of the absence of social security protections for these workers (Fernandez-Niño *et al*., 2018). This situation of labor informality leads to a high incidence of occupational diseases and mental stress. For example, Bolivian workers in the textile industry are exposed to exhausting and prolonged working hours in enclosed environments filled with fabric dust. Due to their informal status, these workplaces do not adhere to occupational health and safety regulations and protocols, increasing the risk of physical and mental health problems (Goldberg; Silveira, 2013; Ibiapina; Adorno, 2023). As undocumented immigrants, access to the formal labor market becomes even more challenging, pushing them into informal and hazardous jobs that do not provide minimum social or health benefits (Neto; Oliveira; Egry, 2023).

The analysis also revealed that the social exclusion of immigrants is exacerbated by factors such as racism, discrimination, and language barriers. These elements hinder both entry into the labor market and access to legal documentation (Souza *et al*., 2020; Neto; Oliveira; Egry, 2023). The marginalization of immigrants within the labor market, particularly those from the Global South and of stigmatized racial backgrounds, underscores how this market is organized into hierarchies based on race, nationality, and class (Brandt *et al*., 2023). Hierarchies related to gender, ethnicity, and skin color position immigrants, especially women and Black individuals, in the most precarious and poorly paid jobs (Lima; Souza; Nunes, 2020; Linardelli, 2021). Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable, often exposed to risks of sexual violence and exploitation, alongside facing greater difficulties in accessing employment opportunities (Santos, 2016; Borges *et al*., 2018; Mansano, 2024).

The lack of legal documentation not only marginalizes immigrants within the legal framework but also renders them invisible in public policies. The undocumented status of immigrants is primarily a consequence of increasingly restrictive immigration policies implemented by many countries, particularly those in the Global North (Sassen, 2002). Furthermore, even in nations where immigration policies are less restrictive and where immigration is not criminalized, the procedures for obtaining documentation and residence visas tend to be bureaucratic and require significant financial resources. In this context, Macedo (2022) argues that current migration policies are violent and restrictive, fostering an environment of xenophobia and nationalism directed at migrants. This climate forces migrants into invisibility and exclusion within the host society, confining them to the most precarious housing, employment, and healthcare conditions. Based on these policies, migrants are pushed into a state of limbo, neither fully alive nor dead, becoming mere survivors, in accordance with 20th-century biopolitical theory (Macedo, 2022).

These cumulative challenges underscore a complex interplay of social determinants that sustain the precarious living conditions of immigrants and hinder their integration into host societies. According to Farmer (2004), social and economic inequalities - often invisible - constitute a form of structural violence that manifests physically in immigrants through disease, food insecurity, social exclusion, and psychological distress. These conditions reflect longstanding historical inequalities with direct implications for the health and well-being of immigrants, emphasizing the urgent need for public policies that address these structural disparities and promote social justice (Farmer, 2004).

The phenomenon known as the “healthy migrant effect” describes the tendency of immigrants to exhibit better health indicators than the local population in the destination country, particularly during the initial post-migration period (Alves *et al*., 2019; Aragão *et al*., 2023). However, this advantage tends to diminish over time as migrants encounter adverse living conditions and barriers to accessing healthcare services (Vyas *et al*., 2024; Loi; Li; Myrskyla, 2024). Aragão *et al.* (2023) highlight this decline, showing that 82,6% of immigrants from low- and lower-middle-income countries reported “good/very good” health prior to migration—a percentage that decreased significantly after migration. A similar decline was observed among those from high-income countries (12,6%). Conversely, Borges *et al.* (2018) indicate that some immigrants from impoverished countries perceive an improvement in their health following migration, illustrating the complexity of the issue and the influence of multiple factors such as social support, labor market integration, and public policies in host countries.

Migration is often characterized by traumatic experiences that impact the mental health of immigrants, beginning from their departure from their countries of origin through their adaptation in the host country. After arrival, social exclusion and poor living and working conditions contribute to the development of anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, underscoring the importance of implementing programs focused on the mental health needs of this population (Piñones-Rivera; Concha; Gómez, 2021).

In addition to poor living and working conditions, another factor that contributes to diminished quality of life and health among immigrants is their limited access to healthcare services. This restricted access is directly related to the absence of entitlement rights in countries lacking universal and free healthcare systems or due to restrictive immigration policies. Conversely, even in countries where immigrants are legally entitled to these services, access is often hindered by cultural barriers, with communication being one of the primary obstacles (Gil-González *et al*., 2015; Martinello; Busato; Lutinski, 2024). The presence of linguistic and cultural barriers, coupled with the lack of interpreters and cultural mediators, as well as healthcare professionals' unpreparedness to address diverse sociocultural contexts, compromises the quality of care (Alves *et al*., 2022). This can lead to misdiagnoses and inappropriate treatments, perpetuating a cycle of misinformation and increased vulnerability.

**3.2 Agency and health protection factors for international immigrants**

Despite the numerous challenges faced by international immigrants, scholars emphasize that this population also possesses “agency” (Mahmood, 2006; Momade, 2018; Soufane; Junemann; Gottsche, 2020; Viana, 2020). According to Soufane, Junemann and Gottsche (2020), agency can be understood as the “ability of an agent to act based on choices, aspirations, and needs.” Recognizing that immigrants have agency necessitates critiquing approaches that portray them solely as passive, submissive, and vulnerable individuals awaiting help and assistance. Viewing immigrants as lacking agency positions them in a subordinate role, denying them a voice in shaping their lives and relegating decision-making exclusively to recipients in the destination country or immigration authorities. However, it is important to note that experiencing oppression and power imbalances does not preclude immigrants from making decisions or exercising autonomy in their lives (Momade, 2018; Soufane; Junemann; Gottsche, 2020). Therefore, this perspective implies that when immigrants are welcomed into destination countries, they should be heard, given the opportunity to express their needs, agreements, and disagreements regarding their experiences and the policies and services affecting them.

Another significant form of agency attributed to immigrants pertains to their capacity to organize themselves into social groups. In this context, support networks play a vital role, not only in reducing uncertainties associated with displacement but also in facilitating access to information, resources, and opportunities within host countries. As Campos (2015) emphasizes, these networks serve as essential support mechanisms that assist immigrants in adapting and integrating into new realities. Soares (2009) further elaborates on this by arguing that informal networks—comprising family, friends, and compatriots, are crucial for the reception, guidance, and adaptation of immigrants to the destination country. Additionally, community associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) become important actors in mediating demands for public services, advocating for rights, and creating spaces of social and cultural belonging for immigrants (Soares, 2009).

According to Lussi (2015), despite the importance of support networks, it is crucial to critically examine the role of the State and public policies as entities responsible for guaranteeing rights that promote a more just, humane, and equitable integration of immigrants into host societies. This is because documentary, linguistic, and cultural barriers continue to render immigrants institutionally invisible, even in light of legal advances such as those introduced by the 2017 Migration Law (Lisbon, 2023). The lack of comprehensive international protection for forced migrants, such as Haitians who migrated in search of survival, underscores the need for revisions in both global and national policies to better address the complexities of contemporary migration flows (Rossa; Menezes, 2018).

It is essential for public policies to advance in addressing the structural inequalities faced by immigrants. Measures such as professional training programs, housing assistance, and culturally inclusive health services are vital for promoting full citizenship. Additionally, the development of both formal and informal support networks can facilitate access to information, public services, and opportunities within the host country, thereby reducing vulnerabilities (Campos, 2015; Lussi, 2015).

Therefore, the presence of solidarity networks among immigrants, religious communities, cultural associations, and non-governmental organizations has proven essential in providing material, emotional, and informational support, thereby mitigating the adverse conditions and vulnerabilities inherent in the migratory context. Furthermore, well-implemented public policies aimed at inclusion, such as migration regularization programs, improved access to education, and incentives for entrepreneurship, can serve as mechanisms to overcome social and economic barriers. The individual and collective resilience of immigrants is also a significant factor, demonstrated by their capacity to adapt, rebuild social ties, and develop strategies to ensure their survival and social integration in the new territory.

4. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the living conditions of international immigrants are intrinsically connected to the structural inequalities that shape their reception experiences. Access to fundamental rights such as health, employment, and housing is influenced by factors including racism, discrimination, language barriers, and inadequate inclusive public policies. These challenges not only compromise immigrants' quality of life and physical health but also significantly impact their social integration and mental well-being.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the agency of immigrants, who utilize formal and informal support networks to develop strategies for overcoming adversities and fostering a sense of belonging in host countries. However, the continued presence of institutional barriers underscores the need for more comprehensive and humane intersectoral public policies.

An integrated and culturally sensitive approach is essential to addressing the inequalities faced by immigrants. Policies that promote universal access to healthcare, professional training, housing assistance, and the recognition of human rights are crucial for building a more just and inclusive society. Additionally, raising awareness about the impacts of structural violence and strengthening community networks are vital steps toward fostering social inclusion and full citizenship for international immigrants.

Consent (where ever applicable)

Not applicable.

Ethical approval (where ever applicable)

Not applicable.

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