

## 18. Digital Leisure and Aspirational Work among Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Women in Brazil

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### Abstract

This chapter builds on a UNHCR Innovation Service project in partnership with Erasmus University Rotterdam, supported by the Government of Luxembourg, where we examined the opportunities afforded by digital leisure for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in northern Brazil. The project aimed to assess the ways in which refugees and migrants use digital media for entertainment and the possibilities of these uses for improved livelihoods. In this chapter, we focus on three women who participated in the project and their perspectives on content creation using digital media. The field work took place in late 2021 in two shelters in northwestern Brazil and involved in-depth interviews with fifteen participants, and a workshop on *how to be a digital influencer*. The analysis of these three cases presents different ways in which refugee and migrant women use digital media and their aspirations for a better life through content creation.

**Keywords:** digital leisure, refugees, migrants, content creation

### Introduction

This chapter builds on a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Innovation Service project in partnership with Erasmus University Rotterdam, supported by the Government of Luxembourg, where we examined the opportunities afforded by digital leisure for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in northern Brazil. The project aimed to assess the

ways in which refugees and migrants use digital media for entertainment and the possibilities of these uses for improved livelihoods (Casswell 2019). In this chapter, we focus on three women who participated in the project and their perspectives on content creation using digital media. The analysis of these three cases presents different ways in which refugee and migrant women use digital media and their aspirations for a better life through content creation.

The field work took place between October and December 2021 in two Venezuelan shelters in northwestern Brazil and was developed in two phases: in-depth interviews with fifteen participants and a workshop on *how to be a digital influencer*. The workshop was designed to assist the participants build a profile, and get to know the world of social media and the current impact they have on our lives. One of the project's goals was to increase participants' interaction with their followers on digital platforms through stories of self-interest. Six classes were held, addressing topics such as: basic aspects to create a story, production, and post production of video and management of social networks. In all, ten Venezuelans produced videos.

## Connectivity and Gender Gap

Although access to mobile phones is highly gendered in conditions of forced displacement, with gender gaps that vary depending on the context, Latin America and the Caribbean reflect some of the lowest gender gaps in terms of mobile ownership and use.<sup>1</sup> However, care and home-making responsibilities that are disproportionately undertaken by women and girls also affect the time they can devote to using devices and engaging in digital play (Arora 2019). This is profoundly problematic, especially considering that research has found that higher education opportunities for refugee and migrant women can be considerably expanded through digital technologies' access and training (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson 2017).

## Digital Leisure, Aspirational Content Creation, and Improved Livelihoods

Leisure has typically been defined on the basis of time, attempting to separate leisure time from other, more constrained activities such as work

1 <https://bit.ly/3Gt9lsz>

and self-care. However, time presents its own limitations as the experience of time differs between men and women due to the overlapping care tasks and responsibilities (Bittman and Wajcman 2000). Moreover, the possibility to engage in two activities simultaneously and the fragmentation of leisurely time due to interruptions means that for many, dedicated, pure leisure time is not a reality, and this should be considered when attempting to understand digital leisure (Ibid.). For our purposes, we consider that digital leisure comprises a range of activities such as gaming, entertainment, romancing, as well as content creation and consumption.

In this sense, there is a gap between the resources needed to provide free access and connectivity to refugees and the realization of their aspirations for digital use. According to Appadurai (2019), migrants' aspirations are often related to the difficulty that exists for their stories to fit dominant, mainstream narratives, with digital media opening new ways of documenting and representing possible life trajectories. Moreover, Witteborn (2019) connects the possibility to use mobile devices and data to the realization of migrant aspirations related to improved lives in social and financial terms. The possibility to connect and participate through digital technologies is positioned as key to achieve goals among migrant communities.

In this chapter, we focus on aspects of digital leisure related to content consumption and creation to assess the livelihood aspirations and strategies of three Venezuelan women living in shelters in northern Brazil. These cases exemplify the different ways in which women experience digital leisure and the existing connectivity limitations that pose significant barriers to the creation and sustainability of livelihood opportunities in forced migration contexts. Given the increasing presence of the gig economy and digital labour as an economic development practice (Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta 2017), it is important to understand how limited connectivity (or the lack of) could influence the livelihoods of refugees, especially for women.

In the context of forced displacement, some international organizations such as UNHCR, have recently been recalibrating their strategic approaches to digital inclusion, investing further in digitally enabled livelihoods. However, many livelihood interventions in the sector remain focused on skills development and subsidies. Critics argue that many of these initiatives have been implemented without real analysis of refugee needs and capacities; thus, there is unrealized potential for generating more sustainable impact for refugees over time (International Labour Organization 2021).

In terms of gender issues, it is important to consider an adaptation of the concept of "aspirational labour," which refers to the uneven gendered pursuit of creative activities that are seen as potential sources of social and

economic capital (Duffy 2016). Two of the main aspects of this concept are applicable here, namely the “narratives of authenticity and realness and the instrumentality of affective relationships” (Duffy 2016, 443). Moreover, the unique challenges faced by refugee women regarding digital livelihoods, not only concern the formal institutional constraints, lack of access to digital technologies, and connectivity, but they are also linked to more complex social and cultural factors. Focusing on Somali refugee women in Kenya and Syrian refugee women in Jordan, Ritchie’s (2017) work has already highlighted the precarious nature of refugee women’s evolving economy. This precariousness occurs especially in a context with low enterprise opportunities, where conservative gender norms and values persist among refugee groups. To further understand these issues, we need an approach that accounts for the specificities and diversity of refugee women’s experiences and situations.

Building on the data derived from the participatory workshop for content creation developed in this project, we analyse the ways in which Venezuelan refugee and migrant women create aspirational content that represents their perspectives and expectations of work and life in Brazil. In the next section, we provide details about the narrative profiles of three refugee women who engaged in field research.

## Methods

The data in this chapter was extracted from a larger study assessing the real and aspirational digital lives of displaced Venezuelans in northern Brazil. For this, ten to fifteen participants in two different shelters, with diverse backgrounds, were recruited and selected to participate in the project.

Once participants were selected, interviews and focus groups were carried out, along with a digital mapping activity to assess the different platforms and usage purposes by communities. The aim was to assess their preferred digital leisure activities and the platforms they prioritize. Later, participants were invited to take part in a six-day workshop with a filmmaker on “How to Become a Digital Influencer.” During the workshop, training was provided to participants on how to create and boost their social media profile and their unique voice online, as well as on the “rules of the game” of social media platforms and their impact on people’s lives. They were also given suggestions and guidelines on how to tell stories about themselves, or things, places, and activities that interest them. The goal was to capture how they imagine themselves, promote engagement with and

within digital spaces, and provide a “creative” dimension that reveals their perspectives, aspirations, struggles, and belongings.

## **Aspirational Digital Narratives of Refugee Women in Brazil<sup>2</sup>**

### **Raquel: The Eyebrow Expert**

Raquel is twenty-five years old and arrived at the shelter from Venezuela five months ago. She worked as a merchant in her country and lives in Brazil with her partner and two of her four children. Raquel explains that she looks forward to moving to a different region in Brazil to get a job and settle. She uses her phone to access social media and to watch videos. In terms of her digital practices, she especially enjoys watching tutorials to learn things such as Portuguese and beauty tips, particularly how to do eyebrows.

Although she consumes videos from YouTube, Raquel has never uploaded a video, but she sees the possibilities in the creation of videos to teach and learn skills. When asked about whether she would like to be a digital influencer, she answered:

Well, mostly I would like to make videos on how to care for (plucking and trimming) eyebrows. Some people know how to do eyebrows, but not perfectly, and I have already practised how to do them perfectly (Personal interview).

In fact, in the video she created during the workshop (figure 18.1), was a tutorial on how to do eyebrows step-by-step, where she included an influencer's name and a brand for her channel, and provided a detailed explanation of the process.

In the case of Raquel, she reflects an example of a woman who wants to display her skills online, creating content, and teaching others how to do it. Her perception of the value of beauty-related video content derives from her own consumption practices and her learning process. She also has an understanding of the teaching-learning possibilities of digital content. Raquel's case illustrates two forms of aspiration, one that goes beyond the

2 On consent: for the primary research, full consent was granted by participants to have their names and faces to be utilized within the research and associated products. However, for this report, names have been replaced and faces anonymized in photographs to minimize risk.



Figure 18.1 Screenshot of Raquel's video

connectivity and resource-related limitations she experiences as a refugee, and also Duffy's (2016) definition of aspirational labour, which includes female content creators who often capitalize on their passions to make a living online.

Displaced women, like Raquel, face issues to access sustainable connectivity that limit their possibilities and capacity to create content. During

the workshops, Raquel had little data on the phone, and she could not download the video production app used in the editing sessions. This was the first time Raquel attended a course about digital content, and she revealed that her posts were essentially on Facebook about memes, Christian messages, and family photos. After Raquel completed the course, she started sharing photos of her work as a beauty professional on the social media platform.

### **Lucía: A Story of Difficulty and Resilience**

Lucía is in her thirties, travelling to Brazil due to health issues and the lack of medical access in Venezuela. She suffers from endometriosis and needs surgery. She works with Adra/United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the area of water, sanitation, and hygiene; she is a WASH officer<sup>3</sup> at the shelter. She travelled with her husband and was recently divorced. She has been in Brazil for four years and enjoys watching funny videos and religious content that promotes reflection.

When asked about the possibility of making a living as a digital influencer by creating videos, she answered,

I don't know, but my dream is to make videos, because my story is hard to tell. I went through five surgeries and God lifted me up. Many people are in the same situation, I had two heart attacks and God raised me up and many things happened. When I arrived here, I was in very poor health. There are things I want the world to understand, that if they are experiencing difficult things, they need to have faith in God (Personal interview).

Her story is one of extreme difficulty and resilience, a story she feels compelled to share.

In the case of Lucía, she wants to motivate others and help them overcome their own difficulties. She is aware of the value and importance of her process to empower others. Inspirational content like the one produced by her constitute an important aspect of digital leisure in the sense that they can help people cope with difficulties and achieve desirable outcomes in mental health (Arora 2019). This kind of content is widely shared among

3 A WASH officer is responsible for the provision of technical support and guidance on activities within the areas of Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH), within the areas of responsibility where the UNHCR works.



Figure 18.2 Screenshot of Lucía's video

refugee communities as a “digital resilience tactic” (Udwan, Leurs and Alencar 2020). Consequently, it is important to highlight the potential of these creative contents and their associated practices to become a form of digital work. For instance, Lucía's desire to make and share motivational and inspirational videos reflects her desire to be a kind of influencer for the community who faces similar struggles.

### **Esperanza: My Husband's Dream**

Esperanza is a twenty-six-year-old mother of three who travelled from Venezuela with her husband and children. When asked about her profession in Venezuela, she responded that she helped her husband with his business as a barber and fixing telephones.

She acknowledged the possibility of making a living through social media but stated that she had never tried to do it. When asked about the content she shares on social media, she said:

Posts giving hope and strength to people, for Venezuelans coming here or still there. I also post pictures of my kids, so my mom can watch them grow up (Personal interview).





Figure 18.3 Screenshot of Esperanza's video

During the workshop, Esperanza created a video devoted completely to her husband as a hardworking man and his dream of having his own barber's shop in Brazil.

It is possible to argue that for Esperanza it is important to support her husband in realizing his aspirations, rather than consider her own personal goals. She reflects an example of the ways in which many women devote their lives to those under their care and how they often live their lives through the eyes of their family members. It is interesting to note the difference between this participant and the other two, where we can see refugee women telling

their own stories, becoming the main character in their own narratives, whereas in this case she devotes the entire video to tell the story of one member of the family, her husband. This also supports Duffy's (2016) argument that different modes of content creation online perpetuate established constructions of gender. In this case, when given the opportunity to create content, Esperanza chooses to fill her expected gender role through the narrative she chooses to tell.

## Conclusion

This chapter argued for the potential of digital leisure as a pathway to novel livelihood opportunities. The stories from the field push the notions of meaningful connectivity beyond the utility-driven notions of digital usage, in this case, for refugees and migrant women. It compels us to move beyond the standard "gender" and "empowerment" trope in development practice where applications are designed to enable limited practices for these women, such as the case of maternity apps, fertility apps, etc. Instead, we should attend to the nuance in women's self-expression through this form of digital storytelling. While typically the focus on beauty has been looked at as a gendered and restrictive notion, in combination with their context and motivation, it can be re-construed as enabling. Likewise, focusing on women's body and health, especially through such public disclosures of what is typically "private" can transform into a feminist act as it carves agency. Similarly, instead of interpreting the wife profiling her husband's aspirations as a mirror of patriarchy, one can reimagine this as a form of micro-power, as the wife gets to tell her husband's story and become the digital curator of his aspirations.

Beauty, the body, and care—all in isolation—can appear to entrench gender stereotypes, but when mediated and curated by these women through digital platforms, can foster novel forms of visibility, upskilling, storytelling, and perhaps new and possibly more dignified livelihoods.

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