Spatial Imaginaries of Digital Refugee Livelihoods

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Abstract
Discourses around the so-called digital economy are increasingly more present in contexts of forced displacement, with digital inclusion of refugees being framed by humanitarian agencies as a fundamental human right and an essential tool to promote access to income and skills development. While digital work can certainly bring about positive changes in forced migration settings, imaginaries around the role of the digital in refugees’ economic lives reflect a broader neoliberal project that envisions a retreat of the welfare state and that places on refugees the responsibility to integrate. This article draws on spatial imaginaries frameworks to advance the theoretical understanding of power differentials that are embodied in the use of technologies to promote refugee livelihoods. A combination of interviews, participant and non-participant observations was used to examine the perspectives of Venezuelan refugee women and humanitarian actors in the context of a digital work initiative in the city of Boa Vista, Brazil. The analysis reveals a mismatch between the imaginaries underpinning digital work opportunities and the expectations and plans of the refugee women themselves about the use of ICTs and engagement in digital forms of employability. Such disconnect can reinforce inequalities for refugee’s agency in the digital economy.

Keywords: digital economy; refugee livelihoods; humanitarian agencies; spatial imaginaries

Introduction
When Adriana left Venezuela to go to Brazil in 2018, she said it was very important for her to get rid of the idea that newcomers must work in a job related to what they had studied in their home country. For Adriana, a former teacher in her fifties, the experience of migrating to the city of Boa Vista, capital of the state of Roraima in Northwestern Brazil, gave her the opportunity to use her cooking skills to start an informal food business selling Brazilian sweets in her new town over the internet. In Venezuela, Adriana said she did not feel the need to look for courses online and learn new things because she was working and had her routine. However, being in Brazil, according to her, changes everything: ‘If now I see a course that grabs my attention and that I know it helps me develop, I will do it, but there (in Venezuela) I didn’t have that need.’ Alongside her determination to succeed as an entrepreneur, Adriana attributes to the smartphone her possibilities to access information resources and social networks that enable her to sustain a source of income, especially considering the lack of employment opportunities and precarious conditions in the host country.

Over the past few decades, digital forms of employability or the so-called digital economy has been seen as a window for economic development (Wahome and Graham, 2020: 1123). Discourses around it are increasingly more present in contexts of forced displacement, with digital inclusion of refugees being framed by humanitarian agencies as a fundamental human right and an essential tool to promote access to income and skills development (UNHCR, 2016). The deployment of digital technologies has been consistently emphasised by government and humanitarian organisations as crucial to fostering refugees’ self-reliance, entrepreneurship and well-being, as well as to implementing innovative solutions through partnerships...
between public-private actors to foster refugees’ economic participation (Easton-Calabria, 2019; Udwan et al., 2020). Recent evidence suggests that digital and digitally mediated work can provide opportunities for displaced people to bypass work restrictions (e.g. the lack of a national identification document, work permit, lack of job opportunities, xenophobia from employers, etc.), match their existing skills and services to a new market and manage their own time and tasks through work available through smartphones (Easton-Calabria, 2019). While digital work can certainly bring about positive changes in the context of forced migration, dominant imaginaries around the role of the digital in refugees’ economic lives tend to reflect a broader neoliberal project that envisions a retreat of the welfare state and the increased marketisation of humanitarianism (Ramsay, 2020). The process of neoliberalism led to structural changes that remove the obligation of states to provide aid and put more pressure on humanitarian agencies to demonstrate the outcomes and impact of their work on the ground (Madianou et al., 2016). Within neoliberalism, civil society actors and the private sector are actively involved in the management of humanitarian causes (Zanforlin and Grohmann, 2022), whereas the individual refugee is demanded a greater responsibility to integrate as a result of austerity measures (Georgiou, 2019). In the absence of welfare support, refugees increasingly participate in projects that aim to promote digital forms of labour and entrepreneurship (Udwan et al., 2020), which constitute a central aspect of neoliberalism.

In this study, we draw on spatial imaginaries frameworks to advance the theoretical understanding of power differentials that are embodied in the use of technologies to promote refugee livelihoods. Broadly described as ‘mental maps representing spaces to which people relate and with which they identify’ (Boudreau, 2007: 2596), spatial imaginaries allow us to analyse underpinning assumptions and understandings of technology produced in association with the practices of using technologies to create livelihoods in specific circumstances and contexts of forced migration. Data about the efficacy and impact of digital work on refugees’ lives are limited. This study presents data from fieldwork observations of a digital work project developed for Venezuelan refugee women in Brazil, which will help to address these research gaps.

### Spatial Imaginaries, Refugee Connectivity and the Digital Economy

In the wake of the so-called ‘spatial turn’ in media studies, frameworks from human and cultural geography have been widely adopted to explain how mediated spaces are produced at different scales (Graham, 2015). In particular, geography’s conceptions of spatial imaginaries, defined as ‘selective mental maps into complex spatial reality’ (Jessop, 2012: 17), can be effective in identifying underlying positionalities that give sense to, enable and legitimise adoptations and productions of digital technology from different perspectives. As stated by Wahome and Graham (2020), technology production is not a neutral, objective process, but instead is shaped by specific ideologies, interests and place.

In recent years, a growing number of studies have paid critical attention to spatial imaginaries and conceptions around refugee connectivity (Cogo et al., 2015; Leurs and Smets, 2018). The use of digital connectivity among refugees has been associated with social inclusion and opportunities to access and meaningfully participate in social, economic, educational and citizenship activities (Alam and Imran, 2015). However, scholars argue that there are multiple complex and nuanced factors that can lead to digital inequalities for refugees, ranging from inadequate infrastructures, access and cost problems, a lack of skills or literacy to socio-cultural and linguistic barriers (Leung, 2018). These factors are often undermined by governance actors who still adopt an overly simplistic view of refugees’ digital inclusion, ignoring the complexity of issues that mediate access to and use of technology among these population groups (see UNHCR, 2020). The simplistic imaginaries of governance actors have shaped the creation of digital interventions that do not reflect refugees’ actual adoption of technology (Alencar and Godin, 2022). These disconnects became visible during the so-called ‘European refugee crisis’ in 2015 and beyond with the proliferation of digital initiatives – such as hackathons, tech-company supported apps, and platforms developed by activists, aid organisations and the private sector – designed to assist refugees but without involving them in the development process (Leurs and Smets, 2018).

Specifically in relation to digital innovations for promoting refugees’ economic participation, several initiatives were put in place by humanitarian and private actors to connect the displaced to the global economy through digital work. The digital economy has emerged with the discourse of opportunities for marginalised communities to join global value chains (Graham, 2015). This is particularly the case of online work platforms which allow corporations to hire freelance consultants on a global scale for tasks that vary in complexity, from very simple digital work that does not require qualification, such as categorisation of images and data entry, to more complex activities, such as translation and web design. In a study investigating digital livelihoods for
displaced people, Easton-Calabria (2019: 14) reported that the growing popularity of online labour platforms prompted the development of initiatives, such as the Refugee Employment Skills Initiative (RESI), funded by the World Food Programme and the International Trade Centre/Norwegian Refugee Council to train refugees to use these platforms for work. While employment on digital platforms is presented as a possibility for the economic integration of refugees in their receiving societies, this type of work does not guarantee stable income and can aggravate refugees’ existing vulnerabilities. For instance, the work of Zanforlin and Ghromann (2022) analysing partnerships between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and larger work platforms, such as Uber and Deliveroo, in the development of entrepreneurship trainings for refugees in Brazil revealed the challenges to secure fair income and precarious working conditions on these platforms.

Further, the imaginaries and discourses that are used to mobilise livelihood initiatives within the digital economy may be seen as an instrument of power that installs new inequalities and which bypass the real needs of displaced people and refugees on the ground (Madianou, 2019; Ramsay, 2020). Rather than creating the conditions for sustainable and inclusive forms of digital employability, top-down technology solutions facilitated through public-private partnerships in the neoliberal framework can potentially enhance discrepancies and reinforce power imbalances between refugee and governance actors (Ayoubi and Saavedra, 2018). Imaginaries of digital innovation in global migration governance fail to account for digital inequalities among target audiences of technological solutions, that is, people in situation of forced displacement (Madianou, 2019). Critical insights into the disconnections between digital imaginaries of private actors (sectors), humanitarian agents, market intermediaries and the refugees themselves reveal the main types of constraints related to digital work in refugee contexts, such as affordability, literacy, access to documentation and fragile digital infrastructures, as well as socio-cultural norms (Easton-Calabria, 2019; Hackl, 2021).

Despite the importance of these findings, very little is still known about the socioeconomic and cultural factors as well as gender relations and subjectivities that accompany the development of digital livelihoods in refugee settings (Easton-Calabria, 2019; Witteborn, 2015). In this research, we consider the perspectives of Venezuelan refugee women in Brazil to understand how disconnected spatial imaginaries of the digital economy affect the everyday lives and economic inclusion of forced displaced populations. The focus on refugee women is particularly relevant for the present analysis, given that limited work opportunities and access to digital connectivity and devices are much more pronounced among women in displacement (Casswell, 2019). Data from several studies suggest that women with a refugee background face significant barriers to accessing digital employment, both within and outside the household (Downer, 2019; Witteborn, 2015). Witteborn’s study (2015) showed that cultural conventions and social norms prevented refugee women from working in technology related jobs (e.g. Internet cafes), even though they had the knowledge, desire and right to be managing these spaces of connection and information sharing. In this regard, scholars have emphasised the unequal gendered pursuit of digital work, leading to what Duffy (2016) refers to as ‘aspirational labour’, that is, women’s engagement in precarious and instable activities that are perceived as potential sources of economic capital, such as digital entrepreneurship and content creation. Furthermore, refugee women are often not able to afford a phone and may be obliged to rely on their husband for connectivity (Casswell, 2019). Previous research on digital practices has been particularly relevant to understand the gender and power dynamics shaping mobile phone usage in refugee settings. The fact that women are disproportionately undertaking care and homemaking duties affect the time they can devote to accessing digital spaces, hindering opportunities for education and employment (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Taking into account forced migration contexts shaped by fragile communication infrastructures, this study is concerned with increasing our understanding of the structural conditions through which digital work is imagined and designed for refugee women and how they perceive and experience the opportunities and challenges within the digital economy. By addressing top-down and bottom-up imaginaries of digital refugee livelihoods, this study adds to the body of much needed research on the complex processes shaping the relationship between refugee connectivity and digital work.

**Digital Work Programme**

The research data in this study is drawn from a digital work project developed for Venezuelan refugee women between the months of September and October 2019 in the city of Boa Vista, capital of the state of Roraima, Northwestern Brazil, which is the main destination for Venezuelans arriving in Brazil by land route. The digital work initiative was carried out within the programme of a global social enterprise of impact-sourcing that focused on providing temporary jobs through a freelance platform. The coordinator of the digital work programme highlighted the importance of the initiative
in the context of Venezuelan migration in Boa Vista, given the difficulties of local economies in absorbing both refugees and local workers into the formal labour market, repeating a global pattern that is also persistent in other migratory flows.

The project was developed at the Reference Center for Migrants and Refugees at the Federal University of Roraima (UFRR), in the framework of the programme 'Portuguese as a Reception Language', which provided a technology lab equipped with twenty computers with internet access and a children’s room to receive the children of the project participants. The institutions participating in the project were multi-sectoral, involving international agencies, local NGOs, religious services, international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the Tent Foundation and international agencies of the UN system (UNHCR, UN Population Fund/UNFPA, UN WOMEN) and the UFRR. The social enterprise developing the digital work project formed a training team with experience in digital education and projects with refugees. The project spanned a period of fifteen days, distributed in three weeks between mid-September and early October 2019. Each workday lasted two hours, consisting of one hour dedicated to the training and one hour devoted to the development of the digital work tasks, making up a total of thirty work hours per person. The enterprise pledged to subsidise the training hours, guaranteeing an hourly wage equivalent to Brazil’s minimum monthly wage (R$1,045 which is equivalent to US$221) to each freelancer. At the end of the project, each participant received a little bit more than the minimum wage. The scope of the digital work proposed included tasks of low complexity, such as the categorisation of images, which, according to the social enterprise, allows rapid learning among people with different levels of digital abilities. The work was hired by an artificial intelligence company that develops a product to improve environment monitoring, in order to curb illegal hunting of animal species. The women had to basically analyse the videos of the area of preservation to identify which animal would appear in the images.

Methodology

The research methodology involved the combination of interviews, participant and non-participant observations throughout fifteen days of project implementation. Video interviews with the Venezuelan women were conducted with the aim of producing a documentary about the experience of the digital work project in Boa Vista. As part of the partnership between the social enterprise and the Reference Center for Migrants and Refugees at the city’s public university, it was agreed that the second author of this paper, and coordinator of the Center, would conduct the video interviews with the refugee women involved. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Review Board of UFRR.

The process of recruiting participants for the project resulted in the selection of eighteen Venezuelan women, aged from 20 to 48 years old, living in Brazil between three months and three years. Most of them were single and only three said they were married. Except for two women, the majority reported having childcare or eldercare responsibilities. Eleven participants have higher education or had interrupted it because it was not due to the migratory process, whereas the other participants said they had completed secondary or technical education. Ten women mentioned they were looking for a job at the time they signed up for the project, while the others stated they were working as housewives, studying or working independently (e.g. domestic service workers, pastry chefs, manicurists). Among the women in the study, eight stated that their first paid work experience in Brazil was in the framework of the digital work pilot project. The majority of participants declared having access to a phone (their own or shared) while not having a computer or internet connection in their places of residence. Many women in this study also shared that they often access the internet through their neighbours, in shopping malls and Internet cafes. This reflects the barriers to digital connectivity among Venezuelan refugees in Brazil with 69 per cent of this population being unable to access Wi-Fi on a daily basis (R4V, 2020). At the time of the study, most Venezuelan women said they did not receive any social benefits and many mentioned that they sent resources to their relatives in their home country. The majority lived in rented houses, except for four participants who said they were residing in the shelters managed by the Brazilian military. Half of the women who participated in the project reported having suffered some type of violence, verbal or physical, during the migratory process or after settling in Brazil. All the participants were adequately informed about the research and that the information they shared in the interviews would be used for academic purposes. The interviews lasted on average 30–45 minutes and were conducted individually in one private room of the university’s Reference Center. The women were asked about their life trajectories related to work, views on digital work, past and present experiences working in the digital, aspirations for work in Brazil and the role of the project in shaping these aspirations.

Furthermore, interviews with the coordinator of the digital work project and the project representative of the World Bank were carried out to understand their views and expectations regarding the project implementation in Boa Vista. The field study also included informal
conversations with stakeholders from UN agencies and local NGOs supporting the initiative, as well as hours of participant and non-participant observations in the computer labs and the trainings organised as part of the project activities. During fieldwork, data collection followed the standard ethical procedures (anonymity, consent, data protection, etc.). Data were transcribed and subsequently subjected to manual coding following the principles of thematic analysis (Boeije, 2010). The analysis builds on the theoretical contribution of spatial imaginaries (Jessop, 2012; Graham, 2015) and their relationship with digital work (Wahome and Graham, 2020) to understand the disconnects between the imaginaries and ideas underpinning the digital work initiative developed by the social enterprise and the expectations and plans of the refugee women themselves about the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and engagement in digital forms of employability. The results obtained from the analysis are described in the next sections.

Disconnected Imaginaries of Refugee Connectivity

In this study, the analysis of digital inequalities among Venezuelan refugee women sheds light on the disconnects between imaginaries of digital connectivity in the context of forced displacement. Barriers to digital access were emphasised by the women participating in the project as limiting the possibilities of engaging in the digital economy. Many suggested that they carried out tasks in places such as bus stops, shopping malls or any space in the city that could provide free access to internet, since they did not have access to constant connectivity: 'It would be perfect to have a digital job like this, to work from home, because of my daughter, I would get access to Wi-Fi with the neighbour, or go to the bus stop with my daughter, there is internet there' (Emily, 33, unemployed). For the Venezuelan women interviewed, digital work depends on having a workspace, digital devices (e.g. computers, phones) and connectivity. 'To start a digital job I would have to buy a good smartphone device, with its own chip, data package and internet. Today I could not accept a job like that’ (Lucia, 35, unemployed economist). Oftentimes, this stability of access is not consistent with the severe economic circumstances and reality of Venezuelan refugees in Brazil (R4V, 2020). According to Mia (31, worked as a hairdresser in Venezuela and arrived in Brazil alone in search of a job), doing work in the digital is a difficult opportunity to take on due to several constraints associated with precarious communication infrastructures and economic resources: ‘If I had to work from my cell phone, I don’t have space for data on it.’

Another important point to consider when addressing digital precarity among refugee women concerns negotiations of the use of ICTs within their families. Throughout the project, some women stated that they had suffered gender violence, also related to the prohibition of their husbands from using the mobile phone, as a form of control (Casswell, 2019). Others mentioned that they had difficulty using the phone because of family sharing dynamics of the device, as reported by Luisana (29, mother of three small children, housewife): 'My cell phone is the only one in the family, I share it with my husband and my three young children. I would have to settle with all of them to be able to work on the phone.'

Interviews with representatives from the NGO organising the digital work project in Boa Vista reveal the creation of an imaginary that starts from a common point: a digital reality (connectivity and literacy) that is universally accessible to and inclusive of the Venezuelan refugee women. According to the project representative of the World Bank, who was in Boa Vista to implement the digital work project, the importance of financing initiatives aimed at digitising the economy lies in the process of integrating people to the opportunities of generating new forms of income. For the head of projects within the digital work organisation, the project experience was positive as it opened up possibilities for training and information. The comment below illustrates their vision of digital work as solution for the challenge of socioeconomic integration in forced displacement contexts:

There is a global pattern of migration between developing countries and it is difficult to absorb labour in these places. Digital work is a possible solution to absorb this workforce from the simplest to the most complex activities. Our perspective is to add new dynamics of local integration based on digital work. The digitization of the economy is an alternative for the inclusion of marginalized groups. It is necessary to think about governance of the digital means of migration, such as the creation of local cryptocurrencies and the creation of digital employment platforms. (Head of the social enterprise developing the digital work project)

The imaginaries of migratory service providers depart from a level where digital accessibility is guaranteed and there is fertile ground for implementing digital activities and projects capable of impacting and facilitating the lives of refugees in the Global South. In the case of the implementation of the project in Boa Vista, a support network consisting of UN agencies also participated in the construction of this abstract imaginary by developing specific training on, for example, female empowerment, entrepreneurship and self-care. During informal conversations with these stakeholders, there were some suggestions that the Venezuelan women's output
increasing family income amid Venezuela’s economic crisis. While some women considered digital work to be a tool to promote the jobs they were already dedicated to in Venezuela, others viewed this type of work as a form of personal growth. Based on the experience proposed by the project, digital work on freelance platforms was not regarded as a career goal by any of the women interviewed. The relationship between the digital and the need to guarantee a source of income seemed to lie between previous work experiences and future work aspirations (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Witteborn, 2015), as expressed by Caroline (27, working as a waitress, unemployed in Brazil), a single mother who dreams of becoming a manicurist in Brazil and being able to make her work visible online through her smartphone: ‘I want to invest in a business of doing nails and promoting my work with my cell phone, it’s very satisfying to have your own business.’ In the same line of thought, Neumary (42, used to work as an English teacher in Venezuela, unemployed in Brazil), who is a cook looking for a job in her specialty, described the use of ICTs as a complement or a form of dissemination of her work in Brazil: ‘I barely used the computer in Venezuela, I worked in the kitchen, what I really like is cooking. If I had to choose, I would want to work in the kitchen. I even made arepas and sold them via WhatsApp, but Brazilians don’t like arepas very much.’

These results are in accord with recent studies indicating the need to understand the long-term impact of online gig-work on refugees and their expectations in terms of digital employability (Easton-Calabria, 2019). In all cases, participants highlighted the socio-economic value of taking part in the digital work programme. Although Venezuelan women found the work proposed by the programme to be relatively easy, the greater satisfaction in participating was marked by the possibility of leaving home, engaging in an activity, being paid, meeting people and having a safe space for themselves and their children. As Marjori (20, single, student in Venezuela, arrived in Brazil with her family) said: ‘What I liked the most about the project is that for me it was a moment of relaxation, of forgetting about problems, escaping from sadness. My family and I went through a lot of difficulties here, I was studying dentistry in Venezuela and one day we had to leave.’ Other participants who did not have previous experience in carrying out any work involving ICTs in their life trajectories reported having feelings of fear and insecurity about their digital skills when entering the computer lab where the project’s activities took place. ‘At first I was a little nervous, but I learned fast, it was easy. It was great to have company, transport, food and remuneration (Maria, 37 years old, pastry chef in Venezuela). In one case, the participant reflected on

Cogo et al. (2015) highlight the mismatches between the ways in which migrant populations understand ICTs in relation to their own needs and the expectations of the creators of digital inclusion policies and actions. Thus, the exercise of reflecting on the use of ICTs and connectivity by refugees requires that the desires and experiences of these social groups be taken into account in the formulation of public policies and projects in the area. The next section of the analysis is concerned with the perspectives of Venezuelan refugee women regarding digital work within the project and beyond.

**Imaginaries of Digital Work among Venezuelan Refugee Women**

In the interviews with the women participating in the project, a variety of perspectives were expressed about digital work. First, digital work was seen as a new type of activity that could help the women generate a source of income. In line with a neoliberal imaginary of employment adopted by humanitarian actors in the programme, work is only considered relevant if it yields financial returns. According to Ramsay (2020: 4), the pervasive logic of economic production in displacement contexts is a way to integrate refugees’ lives within the new configurations of global capitalism, while reducing their access to humanitarian aid and protection. For a small number of participants, the opportunity of earning money was the main reason for them to carry out ICT-mediated jobs. This is the case of Ricsy (24, unemployed) and Luz (28, housewife) who said they engaged in informal work that involved access to ICTs as a way of increasing family income amid Venezuela’s economic crisis:

In Venezuela, I had a computer, Wi-Fi and started earning money by selling schoolwork all over the internet, which helped me pay for my college, but here I can’t do that. (Ricsy)

In Venezuela, I worked at a restaurant that had to close because of the crisis. So I took a bakery course and started taking pictures of the bread I made to send people to know my product. But there came a time when there was no more flour in the market. (Luz)
the importance of digital work as a goal that is worth aspiring to:

I would like to work with something digital, with a computer, but I’m still not sure what to do. In about twenty years the world will change a lot, everything will be connected and I have to find a way to enter this market. In Venezuela, I didn’t see much need to use social networks, to communicate so much, but here I see it. The advantage of working like this, digital, is that we could do it at home, at the best time, but the disadvantage is that sometimes we don’t have electricity or internet. (Mia, 31, hairdresser in Venezuela, unemployed in Brazil)

Despite acknowledging technological limitations, Mia’s example reflects the imaginary that having digital work is about personal choice, which is consistent with the neoliberal tenets of the digital economy. This finding also corroborates the ideas of Duffy (2016), who suggests that women’s personal motivations to engage in the creative digital economy lie in the belief that their work will pay off, irrespective of the precarious conditions involved. For Mia, the future prospect of generating income through ICTs is minimised, downplayed by the baseline level of digital access that is a prerequisite to taking part in digital work.

On the other hand, some women said they had plans to develop activities that include digital technology in their daily work or that they were already involved in, be it for advertising, selling services, making transfers or strengthening their social networks. This is the case of Adriana, whose example is cited in the introduction to this article:

It’s all very different with the phone, precisely because it is wonderful to work and rely on a tool that allows you to be in contact with friends and family on the ground, and that you can also take an internet course that helps with an additional entry in my work. Also the knowledge … Because for me this thing of learning and learning can’t ever stop … to do all these things would never be the same without having a phone. (Adriana)

Thus, some women interviewed perceived the use of the smartphone as a way to increase their family income. As is the case with Karen (39, housewife and a mother of three) who, without social support for childcare, found on her smartphone an informal way to earn money by working with money transfers to Venezuela. ‘I was working for a while with the phone making transfers. I worked together with a niece who lives in Venezuela. I was doing that while I had money in Venezuela. But I started doing this for people in the shelter and they would ask me everyday about the currency’ (Karen). The restriction of formal banking access, as a form of government control in Venezuela, gave rise to small formal digital transfer ventures like Karen’s that functioned independently from official banks. Making money through digital transfers represented the main livelihood for Venezuelans amid scarce economic opportunities in Brazil (Castro and Singer, 2020).

Affordances of Digital Work versus the Lived Realities of Venezuelan Women

A recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense among Venezuelan women that they could reconcile digital work and activities of domestic care. They said they believed that digital work could be more flexible, being possible to do it from home, with possibilities of adapting to a heavy routine of care without support. However, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that in the accounts of the interviewees, the overload of daily activities becomes evident in this attempt at conciliation. One of the interviewees said that digital work was possible because she could do it with a baby in her lap (Neumary), or, as reported by another participant, ‘I am willing to stop sleeping in order to earn some income through digital work’ (Joscarle, 22, unemployed). The existence of problematic imaginaries around the affordances of digital work in relation to flexible work patterns tend to undermine the experiences of women in the digital economy (Duffy, 2016). This is evident in the case of the narrative that it is possible for ‘women to combine work and childcare duties’ (Duffy, 2016: 445).

Considering these perspectives, we noticed that the relationships that participants established with ICTs in terms of livelihood opportunities are not about stories of empowerment but about constant negotiations on how to economically insert themselves in the digital society, often without a support network regarding the economy of family and domestic care. In a context of marginalisation and violence, especially when it comes to refugee women, scholars have called attention to the socio-cultural factors that shape women’s access to livelihood opportunities (Ritchie, 2017). A recurrent theme emerging in the interviews with Venezuelan women concerns their involvement in domestic work and the economy of unpaid care, to which millions of women are subjected (Gutiérrez-Rodriguez, 2010), as limiting factors in the search for financial independence, whether achieved through digital work or not.

I live alone with my daughter at the shelter, there is no one who can take care of her while I work. The shelter doesn’t offer internet, so I couldn’t work, because I don’t have the money to put in credits. My partner, her father, abandoned us as soon as we arrived in Brazil. I feel helpless. (Emily)

In fact, many women reported not looking for a job due to the lack of support for childcare or eldercare in the
family. This is particularly the case of Mary, a thirty-three-year-old schoolteacher who relied on the help of her mother to provide care for her children while she worked in a daycare centre in Venezuela. In Brazil, Mary said that structural barriers and the absence of a family support network have prevented her from accessing the labour market.

Since I arrived in Brazil I spend most of my time with the children at home [...] I don’t have family to visit and nobody comes to visit me either. I was very active in Venezuela; my mother took care of my children and I worked. We are all women with very different backgrounds, but we have one thing in common: we want to work and those with children want to work in jobs that understand that children exist or that help us with their care. (Mary)

These findings broadly support evidence from previous observations (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Duffy, 2016) that the use of ICTs as an opportunity for digital work cannot be separated from a reflection on women’s labour market participation and the need for public policies that foster a support network for them. Thus, digital work, which has been considered innovative to create livelihood opportunities for refugees (Georgiou, 2019; Zanforlin and Grohmann, 2022), can become a challenge to implement if the everyday realities and situations of many refugees, especially women, are not taken into account in a meaningful way.

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the different perspectives and aspirations regarding the possibilities of digital work between providers of migration services and refugees. The proposed themes of analysis reveal the tensions generated by the asymmetric digital imaginaries between the appropriations, aspirations and needs regarding the use of ICTs by the refugees on the one hand, and the intentions projected by the migratory service providers in relation to the forms deemed appropriate for use by these populations on the other. In such a way, we observed that refugee women aspiring to work in the digital economy are confronted with economic, social and cultural barriers that prevent them from realising digital livelihoods, whereas humanitarian actors developing digital work initiatives reinforce idealist imaginaries that do not account for the fragile conditions of Internet connectivity among refugee women in different settings. This disconnect contributes to spreading hopes that may be barely palpable, such as the idea that digital economies are readily accessible, are inclusive, ensure fair income and is compatible with housework and care (Wahome and Graham, 2020). The exercise of dialogue is necessary to adjust the realities experienced by both sides. This discussion crosses important issues related to the care economy to which millions of refugee women are subjected and the lack of public policies of social support.

In this line of argument, the participants’ reports also draw attention to the diversity of uses and appropriations of ICTs by refugees and point to the fact that there is no standard on how to use them for labour aspirations. The only pattern that is repeated for almost all the interviewed participants is the digital precarity and social vulnerability which they find themselves in, constituting limiting factors for a safe and effective entry into the job market. The digitisation of work and the economy are imperatives of our times and it is positive that more projects are emerging in migratory contexts with the aim of integrating people into these new dynamics. However, first of all, it is essential to adapt these projects based on the experiences and aspirations of refugees. Thus, decentralising guidelines on how digital work should be developed in refugee settings can shift the debate by considering social and digital inequalities, gender violence and the need for public policies aimed at the care economy. Thinking about development strategies and livelihoods based on the experiences of refugee women is essential to mitigate digital inequalities and to assert discourses on the importance of connectivity for refugees in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 Between 2016 and 2020, 261,000 Venezuelan forced migrants arrived in Brazil (R4V, 2020), expanding the transnational route of this migration through the state of Roraima.
2 The names of the social enterprise and its programme were kept anonymous in the paper. We used pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of Venezuelan women participating in this study.

Works Cited


