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"My Phone Is Like My Office": Refugee Women's Social Media Entrepreneurship in Dar-es-Salaam

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the cases of two Congolese refugee women who have pivoted their social media engagements to entrepreneurship to offset their immobilization resulting from the Tanzanian asylum regime. The fear of losing access to mobile communications amid the introduction of biometric SIM card registration highlighted the critical importance of mobile telephony to the livelihoods of urban refugees in Dar-es-Salaam. Based on ethnographic research, including qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and (digital) observation, we look at the entrepreneurial opportunities facilitated by social media. While highlighting how virtual mobility and connectivity provide an already marginalized group with essential workarounds, our findings also underscore how these online encounters do not substitute for the need for offline connections. We argue for a nuanced reading of technology's potential to resolve disparities, as we also observe how this potential can reinforce intersectional discrimination based on gender and precarious legal status.

Keywords

ICT4D; informal livelihoods; social media; technology in Africa; urban refugees; virtual mobility; women's entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Following the introduction of compulsory biometric SIM card registration in January 2020, millions of SIM cardholders in Tanzania were locked out of their mobile phones. The added registration process required fingerprints and National IDs of all SIM cardholders. This obligatory registration brought the connection between access to basic services, such as mobile communication, and proof of legal status to the foreground.

Certain groups, such as urban refugees, asylum seekers, and other undocumented individuals, were unable to meet the newly introduced requirements and were hampered in their access to mobile communications and thus excluded from the right to communicate (De Bruijn et al., 2009). Losing this access meant losing contact with friends and family near and far; for many, it also meant being deprived of their livelihoods.

According to Tanzanian asylum law, asylum seekers and recognized refugees are required to live in refugee camps. In other words, legally registered refugees are physically immobilized through an encampment policy (Kamanga, 2005). As only a few obtain official permits for residence and work outside of the camps, moving to the cities leads to the de facto illegalization of urban refugees. This narrow asylum regime informs other economic and social aspects, forcing many refugees in the city to live "in limbo" (Wilson et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many refugees seek to build a future life in the city. While much has been written on camp refugees, refugees in Dar-es-Salaam have received less scholarly attention (exceptions include Mann, 2008; O'Loghlen & Bwami, 2018; Sommers, 2001). This article contributes to studies of the latter category. We use the term "urban refugees" not only in relation to the legally recognized refugees in Dar-es-Salaam, but also to designate people who were forced to leave their country and live in the city, and especially those who self-identify as refugees (Wilson et al., 2021).

Being connected to social media was key for many in finding alternative and creative ways to make a living in limbo. The biometric SIM card registration requirement highlighted the critical importance of mobile telephony to the livelihoods of these refugees in Dar-es-Salaam. Laura, a Congolese urban refugee in her early 30s, put it very clearly: "My phone is like my office." Based on Laura's and her compatriot Hazina's stories, this article explores how mobile phones and social media are lifelines for the many immobilized refugee women in Dar-es-Salaam. Because "formal" employment opportunities in Dar-es-Salaam are accessible only to a small section of the population, informal economic activities "remain the most vibrant economic sphere in the city" (Malefakis, 2020, p. 28). Most urban refugees try to make ends meet by working in the informal economy. In Tanzania, as elsewhere, men are more likely to find work in formal and secure employment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015, p.41). Even within the informal sector, gender remains a key determinant of labor market discrimination, and women are constrained to working in lower income groups. Hence, not only are urban refugees forced to compete with their Tanzanian counterparts, but also refugee women need to navigate the informal economy's gendered division. Technology, however, has facilitated excluded women's participation in the informal economy. In this article, we examine how virtual mobility and connectivity play out in transcending the refugee women's barriers to participation in the informal economy. In a context shaped by the Tanzanian asylum regime and its enforcement through biometric SIM card registration, we ask the following question: How is virtual mobility leveraged to access and sustain livelihoods within gendered informal economies?

The focus of this article is on informal entrepreneurship via social media (henceforth, social media entrepreneurship) rather than on institutionalized e-commerce. Our analysis is grounded in a case study from East Africa, a missing and much-needed perspective within the field of digital migration (Moran, 2022). Griet Steel defines female online entrepreneurship as the ensemble of bottom-up practices of e-commerce that generate new socio-economic opportunities for urban women in Africa (Steel, 2021). Social media acts as an alternative market space that has opened new paths for vendors with limited access to more general online entrepreneurship and offline commerce. Social media entrepreneurs are united in their recognition of social media's popularity, availability, and user-friendliness, and of its facilitation of easy entry into

commerce without cumbersome registration processes or the prerequisite of having a physical store. On platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook, informal vendors can effortlessly display their products or services to attract prospective buyers. Social media's commonality connects consumers with producers and suppliers in a casual yet direct manner. As the barriers to women's engagement in (online) commerce outside social media are manifold and range from legal, temporal, financial, and spatial to gender-related constraints, social media entrepreneurship is not peripheral but appears in different modes worldwide; it is practiced by people across different social strata, including by urban refugee women. In this article, we describe and underline the opportunities offered by social media, though we do so with caution.

The article is structured as follows: In the following section, we present the main argument's conceptual framework, which is found at the crossroads of debates on transnationalism, media studies, informal networks, and feminism in (forced) migration studies. While many studies focus either on the nexus of migration and media or on gender and media, we choose to situate our article at the crossroads of all three: migration, gender, and media. We adopt an intersectional feminist approach to the experiences of migration (Savaş & Dutt, 2023), understanding the experiences of refugee women as shaped by the co-constitution of legal status, social class, migration trajectories, and gendered power relations. Focusing on women who have been forced to leave their homes and who live in Dar-es-Salaam as refugees, we illustrate the intersection of both (non-)citizenship and gender in relation to the use of media in the informal economy. Moreover, our purpose in approaching technological innovation within the Global South is to reiterate the importance of Africa's place on the map of global e-commerce (Steel, 2021). In Section 3, we discuss the methodological opportunities offered by social media, particularly messengers such as WhatsApp, but we also reflect critically on the platforms' limitations, including concerns around data security. We then dedicate Section 4 to the case studies of two Congolese women living in Dar-es-Salaam who engage in social media entrepreneurship: Hazina and Laura. We selected these two cases because their trajectories capture recurrent patterns of social media entrepreneurship, while their differences provide analytical leverage. In other words, their stories are ethnographic examples that illustrate themes that reappeared across the wider group of participants in our study, while also underscoring the heterogeneity of the women's trajectories and strategies. Their stories also help us to scrutinize the potentials and limitations of mobile telephony in navigating immobilization in Dar-es-Salaam. In Section 5's discussion, we contextualize the two cases in relation to the requirement for biometric SIM card registration. In this section, we also critically engage with and nuance essentializing discourses on social media and on ICT for development (ICT4D) optimism. The article ends with a conclusion.

2. Social Media Entrepreneurship in Transnational Africa

Hazina and Laura's stories are situated in debates that touch upon informality, transnationalism, and media studies from an intersectional perspective: As African migrant women in legally precarious conditions (Savaş & Dutt, 2023). The emergence of mobile phones in Africa opened new social, political, and economic opportunities (De Bruijn et al., 2009; Poggiali, 2017). Through the creation of virtual spaces, traditional notions of spatiality became continuously challenged. These new forms of connectivity enabled the compression of space, distance, and time and thus facilitated social coordination (McIntosh, 2010). While physical marketplaces continued to exist, their position came to be challenged by online marketplaces after the uptake of internet-based ICTs. In recent years, e-commerce, characterized by sales between third parties that are mediated through internet platforms such as Amazon, Alibaba, and Jumia, has grown exponentially,

especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding the barriers that e-commerce places before entrepreneurs in the informal sector, informal trade has extended to social media—not necessarily as a replacement for physical trade but as an addition to it. Practices in the informal sector have also been digitalized. The mobile phone's potential for instantaneous connectivity thus demands an examination of informal economic opportunities generated through social networks in the digital age.

Not having a legalized status excludes refugees from seeking official employment. The need to circumvent and avoid surveillance also shapes refugees' economic mobility (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Without the legally required papers, refugees are relegated to the informal sector for subsistence. Refugees who trade in the informal economy instrumentalize personal ties and social capital spanning large distances, extending across borders, and to their home countries and beyond. As we shall see later, these networks are turned into valuable resources that foster the resilience of urban dwellers, including urban refugees (Etzold et al., 2019). In other words, network capital extends into the digital spheres of the "connected migrant" (Diminescu, 2008).

Building on Bourdieu, Urry (2012) proposes the concept of network capital in the mobile age as the ability to initiate and maintain social relations with people who are not in the physical vicinity. Within the informal economy, traders in different African settings instrumentalize personal ties and social capital (Steel, 2021; Trefon, 2004). These relations provide practical, financial, and emotional benefits, usually with the involvement of networking technologies. Migrants' and refugees' social networks are not only local but also transnational (across national borders) and translocal (across different locales and other non-national boundaries). Whereas transnationalism has been criticized for falling prey to methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), translocalism (Brickell & Datta, 2011) does not draw a sharp distinction between locations across national boundaries. In a way, the digital space becomes another locale within translocalism. Transnationalism and translocalism continue to capture the processes in which migrants live in one place yet maintain ties with their societies of origin (Bakewell & Landau, 2018; Brickell & Datta, 2011), also in the digital sphere. Urban refugees living in Tanzania, for instance, maintain ties, and capitalize on them, with family and friends in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). These ties are turned into assets and are not limited to these two countries, as many have family members and friends who live in distinct locations across Tanzania (within and outside refugee camps) or have moved to third countries (within and outside Africa).

In the last decade, after the so-called 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, the combined field of media and migration studies has received increased attention (Leurs, 2023; Smets et al., 2019), acknowledging the vital role that ICTs play in the maintenance of transnational relations (Wilding & Gifford, 2013; Witteborn, 2015). One criticism of this recent literature, however, touches upon its infatuation with the "refugee journey," which tends to overshadow other issues related to (temporary) settlement and integration with local populations (Leurs & Patterson, 2020). A second criticism relates to its Eurocentric focus. Indeed, most studies focus on the role of mobile technologies in resettlement processes in Western countries (Alencar, 2020; Mancini et al., 2019), despite the scholarly work combining forced mobility and technology in other contexts, including Africa (see for instance Bardelli, 2021). Third, notwithstanding an existing literature on online resistance against the reinforcement of gender categories (Daniels, 2009), a gender perspective regarding online female entrepreneurship and its emancipatory possibilities remains underexplored (McAdam et al., 2020; Ughetto et al., 2020). As we shall see, women face gender-specific barriers in setting up businesses, including gender norms, expectations, and limited access to funding.

Street vending, the epitome of the informal economy, requires physical mobility and leads to different forms of harassment, especially for refugee women. This leads to a de facto immobilization that further complicates the refugees' participation in the informal sector. Virtual mobility, as a substitute for physical mobility, offers a way out (Kenyon, 2006). Unlike digital mobility, as discussed by Ullrich (2017) in the context of migration journeys, which highlights how smartphones can enhance geographical mobility, and unlike mediated mobility, which examines how media technologies manage and regulate movement (Keightley & Reading, 2014), we foreground virtual mobility as the substitution or supplementation of physical travel through digital communication. This perspective emphasizes how connectivity can mitigate social exclusion by offering alternative forms of access and participation under conditions of restricted mobility. As a response to the multi-faceted barriers to engaging in e-commerce via online sales platforms, Bangladeshi women, for instance, have leveraged social media as an alternative way of engaging in online commerce (CGAP, 2019). Likewise, Kenyan and Sudanese women engage in social media commerce from any intimate sphere (Mukolwe & Korir, 2016; Steel, 2017, 2021). Social media commerce's compatibility with other responsibilities can widen the navigation space between gender role expectations, including substantial amounts of unpaid care work, personal (educational) ambitions, and engagement in economic activities (Steel, 2017). Despite the restrictive measures placed on female merchants in Sudan, for instance, the digital sphere grants female entrepreneurs novel flexibility and mobility. In Khartoum, it has offered women a new space to navigate and in which to engage in commerce successfully (Steel, 2021). Also, in Dar-es-Salaam, this form of digital entrepreneurship has become increasingly attractive to people from all walks of life—young and old, citizen and non-citizen, affluent and impoverished—who are faced with juggling multiple roles and demands. The digital context, as such, may offer women "opportunity spaces" (Ughetto et al., 2020) for social media entrepreneurship.

Finally, while we acknowledge the transformative power of ICTs to contribute to bottom-up development, we invite scholars to be equally critical of the ICT4D paradigm. Digital technology is indeed not a one-size-fits-all solution and cannot offer a blueprint for empowering those navigating the margins (Daniels, 2009). To start with, governments, ICT4D, and technological enterprises can and do determine accessibility to the internet (Pype, 2021). In fact, they are at times even implicated in exploitative practices, as they allow power holders to extract personal data and exert control over the livelihood means of their citizens (Pype, 2021). Leurs and Patterson (2020), moreover, underline that constant connectivity makes refugees with no legal status vulnerable, as it facilitates their surveillance and traceability. The digital labor market can also reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities and even lead to further exploitation (Easton-Calabria, 2019). As long as social inequalities and local power relations persist, ICTs' development potential remains limited (De Bruijn, 2019). The use of mobile phones and ICTs can potentially surpass spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries; yet, as Wallis (2011) emphasizes for rural China, they do not erase limiting conditions and eliminate *all* boundaries. To understand these subtleties, studies on the use of ICTs and social media need to be contextualized. ICTs and digital media (including social media) are not the same everywhere. Different people use technologies differently, and media are transformed as their use shifts from one context to another (Morley, 2017). For Mavhunga (2017), for instance, technology is not a universal inbound instrument that solves African problems; rather, Africans' use of technological tools contributes to dealing with their own challenges while changing mobile technology in the process. Hence, despite the risks, urban refugee women in Dar-es-Salaam contribute to molding social media as they make use of it. We will elucidate this by means of the stories of Hazina and Laura, to which we will turn after discussing our methodology.

3. Methodology: "Smart" Methods

Many academic articles dealing with digital methods start off by stating (rather redundantly) the omnipresence of the digital in our daily life (e.g., Hjorth et al., 2017). While we acknowledge the "methodological opportunity" (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020) that smartphones offer, we must not lose sight of the enduring link between the analogue and the digital. The analysis presented here was part of a larger research project that looked at how transnational, translocal, and local networks, as well as mobility, are used as resources by displaced people to manage their everyday lives (Etzold et al., 2022). Within this broader framework, this article focuses specifically on the social media usage by vulnerable migrants in a refugee-like situation by selecting relevant cases from a corpus of data that consists of 41 detailed case studies of urban refugees aged 18 to 65 from the DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi. The data were collected in collaboration with colleagues in DIGNITY Kwanza at intervals between 2019 and 2021, using qualitative and ethnographic methods, including interviews, informal conversation, focus group discussions, and (participatory) observation. All these methods were conducted online and offline. In most cases, interviews were conducted in pairs and took around two hours. However, the interviews were not delimited by the start and the end of the recording and included phone calls before the visit itself, commuting from one side of the city to the other, meeting acquaintances of the interviewee, and having several small-talk conversations with third parties. The seven focus group discussions, which included between 6 and 10 individuals each, were held at DIGNITY Kwanza's premises. These discussions were held primarily in Swahili, organized by age and gender, and covered different topics touching on the experiences of urban refugees in Dar-es-Salaam.

Even though the use of social media was one of the themes in the research design, we did not think of social media entrepreneurship prior to our research. From early on, however, we particularly noticed women's engagement in social media entrepreneurship. The introduction of biometric SIM card registration in 2020 brought social media entrepreneurship's relevance unexpectedly to the fore. Guided by the principle of serendipity, we embraced its saliency in our analysis (Rivoal & Salazar, 2013). Among the 41 detailed case studies (mentioned above), 15 stood out for their practice of social media entrepreneurship. This engagement occurred at different points in time during the research and with varying frequencies of use of social media; and 10 of the cases involved women. Some posted daily, while others did so weekly, and yet others only sporadically. To understand how social media entrepreneurship worked in context, we chose the two women digital entrepreneurs who were the most active and avid social media users and who did not belong to the same business sector. Furthermore, our choice was guided by a gendered focus as well as by quality above quantity. In order to better ground our argument, describing the context in which these two women navigated is important. Their stories, however, do not stand alone; they are embedded in wider (digital) observations on social media use, which included refugee men and Tanzanian women.

The ethical clearance of the research was obtained from the EU funding organ. Additionally, we strictly followed the advice of colleagues in DIGNITY Kwanza. The names of research participants have been anonymized, and obvious identity markers have been removed. Our analysis did not follow a strict software-assisted qualitative content analysis with coding procedures; we employed an ethnographic approach grounded in close engagement with the research participants. Hence, we produced detailed transcripts and memos capturing both the contents of the interviews and additional observations, which later became the basis for our iterative offline and online team discussions.

Three social media platforms were used: WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. We particularly focus on WhatsApp and its use on three levels: (a) as a tool for private communication; (b) through its status update feature; and (c) as a platform for coordination, discussion, and collaborative reflection among the authors. Regarding the first level, WhatsApp provided an informal channel for communicating with participants, many of whom used the app regularly in their daily lives. It enabled us to approach participants casually in a comfortable conversational atmosphere that encouraged open communication (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). Successful WhatsApp conversations and online ethnography were possible only once trust had been established through prior and repeated in-person meetings. This mode of communication proved especially valuable during the Covid-19 lockdown, but it was equally convenient for checking in with participants at a later stage.

Second, WhatsApp's status update feature caught our attention the most. This feature allows users to share text, audios, photos, videos, and GIF updates that disappear after 24 hours (WhatsApp, n.d.). While the authors Catherina and Mira were initially unaware of this feature, they soon noticed that refugees and Tanzanian colleagues posted goods for sale on their statuses. Smartphones seemed to offer an additional means of following participants (Zijlstra & van Liempt, 2017); and in our case, we followed interlocutors online through their changing statuses.

Third, as part of the collaborative writing process for this article, we set up a group chat among ourselves as authors. This group served multiple purposes: It enabled logistical coordination (e.g., scheduling Zoom meetings and sharing updates), but beyond that, it facilitated and stimulated a joint, informal, yet analytical space for discussion and reflection, while ensuring that no sensitive data were shared. This ongoing online conversation between the authors was enmeshed in the digital spaces that we were analyzing, and thus we came to realize that the process was part of the analysis itself. Two specific features contributed to establishing this discussion: First, the possibility of creating a group to which all authors had simultaneous access helped us in "reconstructing meanings and practices in co-productive data elicitation"; second, the possibility of sharing thoughts through voice messages motivated us to engage "in inventive, more meaningful ways to co-produce knowledge" (Kaufmann, 2019, p. 169). While we highlight here the methodological opportunities offered by digital tools, we return in our Conclusion section to critically reflect on their limitations and ethical implications.

We drafted this article combining emic (DIGNITY Kwanza) and etic (Catherina and Mira) perspectives. Were it not for the collaboration with DIGNITY Kwanza, Catherina and Mira would not have been able to create bonds of trust with Congolese refugees. Furthermore, DIGNITY Kwanza's knowledge of the legal and local context was invaluable. However, being a Tanzanian organization, DIGNITY Kwanza was still an outsider to the refugee community. Here, Catherina contributed with knowledge from previous work and firsthand experiences with Congolese within and outside the DRC. While DIGNITY Kwanza communicated in Swahili with the refugees, Catherina conversed with many in Lingala and French. In some cases, this led to complementary data. As an MA student enmeshed in digital culture, Mira could relate to many of the young women as peers, rather than as *dada* (the Swahili term for big sister), which led to another sphere of confidentiality. Finally, the physical constraints related to the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to use digital methods more avidly. During the pandemic, we lost contact with some participants, while we could communicate with others and, in some instances, assist with basic needs. What started out as a necessity turned into a tool. Being forced to rely on our smartphones eventually sparked the idea for this article.

4. Case Studies: Social Media Entrepreneurs

4.1. Hazina: Mobile Beauty Entrepreneur

In the mid-2010s, Hazina and her brother (15 and 8 years old at the time, respectively) found themselves forced to flee their home in eastern DRC after losing their family to the atrocities of the war. Upon arrival in Dar-es-Salaam, Hazina tried to reach out to an uncle in Europe. After trying different communication channels, she managed to track him down:

> I remembered that Facebook had helped me to find someone. It was very easy for me to find him [her uncle] and get help…so I saw how important social media was for us. Because if it were not for the internet, maybe if there was no Facebook, I would not have been able to find that man [her uncle]. (Hazina, 10 March 2020)

Hazina managed to reconnect with her father's younger brother through Facebook. Having had this first positive experience with social media, Hazina identified it as a potentially helpful tool. After her uncle's attempts to have Hazina and her brother join him in Europe failed, Hazina, still underage, had to assume the responsibility for herself and her younger brother. While financially supporting the two, their uncle asked Hazina to come up with ideas regarding livelihood prospects. Having experience in braiding hair and manicure for many years, though not as a paid service, she decided to try the beauty sector.

Hazina had come to Tanzania seeking refuge but did not register as a refugee; instead, she decided to regularly renew a tourist visa. Unlike recognized refugees, who the law forces to remain in refugee camps far away from the city, tourists and migrants enjoy some degree of freedom of movement. However, as a migrant, Hazina could neither own nor run a business unless she applied, and especially paid, for costly resident and working permits, which are out of reach for most urban refugees (Wilson et al., 2021). Confronted with all these barriers to setting up a physical salon in the formal circuit, Hazina created her own Instagram page and started posting pictures of hairstyles, polished nails, and make-up. She thus leveraged social media to promote *à domicile* beauty services. This was not without risk; to do her work, she even displayed her private number publicly. She explained: "I was working everywhere you are. I was going to the person. I remember I was working mobile. So everywhere you are, you can just call me, fix an appointment, and I will come" (Hazina, 10 March 2020).

Social media enabled Hazina to promote her services and be mobile by offering her services door to door, yet mediated through her phone. As her business grew, so did the distances from her clients, and she began to experience physical mobility constraints while moving from one customer to the next. Not only were the distances in Dar-es-Salaam long, but the urban infrastructure did not support the city's urban growth well. This resulted in nerve-racking and time-consuming traffic jams. Moving around was also expensive: Paying several bus fares involved consuming financial resources and many lost hours on the road. For Hazina, this mode of operation did not make for a lucrative business in the long run. Indeed, cutting travel costs has frequently been cited as the mobile phone's most critical value for entrepreneurs (e.g., Kwami, 2016). However, in Hazina's case, the mobile phone could not substitute for her physical presence, as she could not deliver her services without her physical presence. If she wanted to stay in business, Hazina had to develop alternatives to moving around. If she could not go to her clients, then her clients had to come to her.

Hazina's social capital, including her work relations with new clients, proved to be a vital asset. It was through investing in these relationships that she managed to open her own beauty parlor in 2018 through one of her Tanzanian clients. Their collaboration worked as follows: On paper, the Tanzanian owned the beauty parlor. Hazina ran the parlor entirely by herself but played the role of an "employee" instead of an "owner." This collaboration resulted in a "win-win situation" for both. Hazina could run her own business, while for the Tanzanian, having a salon in her name benefited her image. As an employee, however, Hazina was not respected by her colleagues, who often came in late to work and made disdainful comments to her. As she could not address their behavior as their boss, Hazina did not feel respected (Wilson et al., 2021). Her business grew, her online reputation strengthened (her page counted over 98,000 followers in 2020!), and she used her Instagram page to expand her business and display other products. She explained:

> I post it [the product] on my page. So, if you want some, just call me through my phone. You say, "I saw the picture on your page, I want one." You send the picture to my WhatsApp number, and I can see it. If I still have it, I'll tell you the price, and you'll buy it. Finish....I thank the man who created the internet and social media [laughs]. I really thank him! (Hazina, 10 March 2020)

Hazina branched out by running a side business through her social media channels: selling bags, textiles, jewelry, and other accessories. This business started after a *vitenge* (colourful African print) and bag vendor from Lubumbashi (the DRC's second-largest city) contacted Hazina through Instagram and proposed working together. Their partnership worked as follows: Hazina's Congolese partner sent her pictures of various products, which she then showed to people in her personal network—for instance, the beauty salon clients or fellow churchgoers. As the new customers made orders, Hazina communicated them to her partner. Then, her partner sent the ordered goods on a daily bus connecting Dar-es-Salaam with Lubumbashi. Finally, Hazina paid her partner via Western Union. At times, Hazina was physically involved in showing pictures to potential customers, but she was not required to walk around carrying the products. In fact, Hazina "carried" the products by mediating them through social media on her mobile phone. Her posts on WhatsApp and Instagram made them circulate virtually. The entire process (offering products, negotiating, taking orders, and making payments) ran via mobile communication, yet it could not be fully detached from the offline world.

4.2. Laura: Online Transnational Dalali

Like Hazina, Laura was born and raised in eastern DRC. Against the backdrop of an ongoing conflict and the accompanying risks for girls and women, Laura's parents decided she should leave for a "safer place" (Laura, 20 February 2020). After graduating from university with academic degrees in economics and development, she moved to Dar-es-Salaam, where her older sister resided. Laura crossed into Tanzania with a single-entry visa via Uganda. This 90-day visa did not allow Laura to reside or work officially in Dar-es-Salaam, where economic uncertainty and idleness shaped her life situation: "Here in Dar-es-Salaam, I was just at home, doing nothing. Sitting at home every day, without getting anything" (Laura, 20 February 2020).

Idleness, boredom, and hopelessness have been identified among the most frequent and pervasive challenges refugees face (Betts et al., 2019; Grayson, 2017; Wilson, 2019). As described above, informal livelihoods function as significant workarounds, as they allow refugees, who are legally barred from formal employment, to circumvent permit requirements and to work. In Laura's case, however, her sister's

relocation to a neighborhood on the outskirts of Dar-es-Salaam further complicated her own entrance into the informal working world. As Laura explained:

> When she went to her place in Kitunda, it was far. If I wanted to come to town, maybe walk the streets and meet somebody, maybe a customer, if I didn't have transport fees, it was difficult. So, I decided to stay with my friend, my Kenyan friend. (Laura, 20 February 2020)

Compared with other refugees, Laura's physical mobility in the city seemed less restricted, in the short term, because her regularly renewed visa entitled Laura to move around legally. However, after some time passed, being unable to work legally because of the lack of a work permit immobilized Laura economically. At the same time, her attempts to create a livelihood by circumventing permit requirements were impeded by her being physically distant from the city center (when she moved with her sister to the outskirts of Dar-es-Salaam): She could not afford to pay daily transportation fees. In fact, Laura's economic and physical immobility in the city reinforced one another. Only when she decided to move in with a Kenyan friend to remain physically close to the city center did things start to change. Closer to downtown, she could network and connect to others more easily.

Slowly but surely, Laura turned into a *dalali*. *Dalali* are sales transaction intermediaries. Often considered as unemployed men, *dalali* are known to hang around a *kijiweni* (or a hangout spot), waiting to run into opportunities. While intermediaries are not unique to Tanzania (see Nzeza Bilakila, 2004, for a Congolese example), little attention has been given to their practices in online spaces. Whereas Laura was initially forced to run into her customers on the streets of downtown Dar-es-Salaam by accident, she soon started "chasing" people in the virtual space. As such, Laura translated the *dalali* practices to the digital sphere, which then enabled her to extend them to the DRC: "I took my phone and started interesting people from my home [Congo], 'You know I am doing this now. Can you give me your documents so that I can do it for you?'" (Laura, 20 February 2020).

Being landlocked, the eastern provinces of the DRC are dependent on East African ports (Mombasa, Dar-es-Salaam) for the importation of manufactured goods. Through her mobile phone and social media, Laura created a niche for herself by guiding fellow Congolese with their shipments entering Tanzania. She lived off commissions, and the mobile phone facilitated connectivity over large distances, allowing communication with her clients in the DRC. When Laura started her *dalali* trajectory in 2011, she worked with a simple mobile phone and visited internet cafés to access her emails. With a smartphone, she no longer relied on being in specific physical places to access the internet; she could work from anywhere, and the smartphone granted her the mobility that her permit did not. Just as the *kijiweni* was reconfigured spatially, "the phone" became "the office."

Due to the volatility of earnings as a *dalali*, Laura also tried to find regular employment. She managed to secure an informal position in an auditing company. However, when the firm leadership changed and Laura's new boss discovered that she was Congolese, she was abused and fired without a salary:

> Laura: [The old boss] knew that I am Congolese. So, I was working with him without any problem. But when the company collapsed, the new boss took me without knowing that I was Congolese, not Tanzanian….He did not want to see any documents.

Mira: You mentioned him finding out that you were Congolese. What happened?

Laura: Ahhh. Heeeh. It changed. I was exhausted, and he was abusing me, and at the end of the day, he told me, "Today, leave my company." And I said, "Okay, thank you. Thank you for the time I was here, bye-bye."....Till now, he hasn't paid me. (Laura, 20 February 2020)

Despite the financial uncertainty, Laura decided to resume working as a *dalali*, mediating between a Tanzanian company and Congolese customers wanting to ship goods through Dar-es-Salaam's harbor. While Laura's past forced mobility mainly restricted her opportunities, in the context of activating and navigating a transnational network with Congolese clients it became an asset.

5. Discussion

Despite the openings social media brought about, the above cases show how the virtual mobility and connectivity enabled by the smartphone cannot substitute for everything. While allowing Hazina to coordinate and promote her beauty services, her physical (offline) presence was still required. Despite the risks, Hazina successfully navigated the business opportunities she encountered among Dar-es-Salaam's residents. She translated online encounters into offline appointments. Social media served as mediation. This illustrates that in gendered and feminized service economies such as beauty, virtual mobility primarily supplements rather than substitutes. Social media may provide visibility, support marketing, and facilitate logistics, but the embodied labor of braiding, make-up, and manicure remains non-substitutable and must take place physically. In contrast, Laura could mostly work from anywhere and even connected virtually with her clients in the DRC. Her case shows how virtual mobility can substitute for core brokerage functions, traditionally practiced in public, male-dominated spaces of interaction. The use of the mobile phone enabled Laura to perform brokerage without needing to enter those spaces physically. For a woman with a precarious legal status, virtual mobility thus lowered barriers to entry and reduced exposure to unwanted visibility as well as the costs of commuting in the city. Nonetheless, Laura would not have realized her *dalali* business if not for her Tanzanian partner. It is precisely the trusted local Tanzanian connections, who know their refugee identity, that Laura and Hazina have in common. Their offline connections with Tanzanians facilitated them in circumventing legal restrictions and enabled the use of mobile phones as offices.

Taken together, these cases underline that virtual mobility alone is insufficient. Its potential rests on connectivity that is sustained through trusted social relations offline. Two things follow from this: First, online and offline encounters are inseparably intertwined; second, the trusted Tanzanian connections played a crucial role in realizing the potential of mobile communication and social media to navigate livelihoods in Dar-es-Salaam. Generally, it is notable that many urban refugees tend to keep their circle of insiders small (Wilson et al., 2021). The chosen, trusted few are important. However, the path towards a trusted relationship is bumpy: Many refugees seeking business opportunities in the informal sector, including Laura, reported falling victim to fraud by alleged business partners and not having options for action because of their legal status. Here again, women are more prone to abuse than men. One pregnant refugee woman, unable to walk long distances, reported asking a Tanzanian man to deliver clothes to her customers in her place. The man ended up running off with her goods. This intersectional discrimination became more evident in the context of the compulsory biometric SIM card registration in 2020. Without the necessary documents, all unregistered phone lines were closed after Tanzania hit the final deadline in January 2020. As a large

segment of Tanzanian society was in fact affected by the lockout, registering a SIM card under somebody else's National ID became a widespread practice, even though it was an act that could be legally prosecuted (see Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority, 2020). Nonetheless, most refugees, like Laura and Hazina, were able to circumvent the lockout or reopen their lines with the help of Tanzanian citizens. While this certainly pointed to the existence of trusted relationships between refugees and Tanzanians who were willing to help refugees not lose access to mobile communication, there were other instances where the biometric SIM card registration reproduced and reinforced social and structural inequalities.

Young refugee women were particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as some Tanzanian men did not shy away from demanding some form of intimacy in return for their registration favors. During one focus group discussion, for instance, a young refugee woman explained that she had to pay 7,000 TZS (about three euros at the time of writing) to get her SIM card registered via a Tanzanian. When this person understood she was not Tanzanian, he wanted her to sleep with him to "help" her out. Another participant explained that when she wanted to repair her phone and the repairer discovered she was a refugee, he asked her to sleep with him, implicitly suggesting that refugees do not have money to spend on repairs. Smartphones not only facilitate mobility, but they can also place women in vulnerable and exploitation-prone situations (Easton-Calabria, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to see how gender and legal status intersect in the context of vulnerable women in refugee-like situations.

6. Conclusion

Seeking safety, Hazina and Laura fled their homes in the DRC. In order to circumvent physical immobility in the refugee camps, both women chose not to register as refugees but to live on regularly renewed tourist visas in Dar-es-Salaam. They were not refugees in the legal sense, even if they might self-identify as such. At first glance, the visas provided enough safety to roam around in the city. Nevertheless, a tourist visa did not allow the women to seek formal employment or register their businesses, which would have required them to apply for costly residence and work permits. In spite of this, the broad spectrum of Dar-es-Salaam's informal economy offered them opportunities to circumvent permit requirements and to make ends meet.

In this article, we approached technological innovation within the Global South to reiterate the importance of Africa's place on the map of self-organized, social media entrepreneurship. Hazina and Laura identified social media as a valuable tool for navigating the challenges of being unregistered migrants. Both women relied on their phones to make a living. Although the experience of discrimination and the high costs of commuting in a bustling city complicated participation in informal livelihood activities, social media platforms opened avenues for entrepreneurship. In Dar-es-Salaam, women urban refugees used their smartphones to get around permit requirements and avoid exposure to discrimination. Social media entrepreneurship was nothing peculiar to refugees; a large section of Tanzanian society engaged in it too. But, as economic navigation space was limited, refugees, even more so than others, depended on these alternative ways of engaging in business.

While social media brought about new opportunities, the state-controlled access to telecommunications, as enforced through biometric SIM card registration, reproduced female urban refugees' marginalization and vulnerability. Women urban refugees in Dar-es-Salaam, however, managed to circumvent being locked out of their SIM cards and to maneuver within the society they lived in by collaborating with locals. While ICTs and social media enabled refugee women in Dar-es-Salaam to search for a living in safer spaces, their use

did not make them unsusceptible to abuse. The biometric SIM card registration and stories of sexual abuse reveal how access to mobile technologies can be difficult for refugee women. As such, even if we acknowledge the potential of digital connections to circumvent barriers and access opportunities, we caution against the general euphoria surrounding the potential of virtual mobility to resolve *all* disparities. The politicization of mobile telephony can inversely lead to critical disconnections. In their attempts to avoid disconnection, women can find themselves in risky situations that reproduce old and even create new inequalities. More than merely celebrating the potential of virtual mobility to resolve unequal access, our goal is to nuance the value of these digital connections, as the latter can also become a source of immobilization themselves.

Our analysis drew on two detailed case studies that served as ethnographic examples to provide depth to broader dynamics of gendered and sectoral differentiation in social media entrepreneurship, especially in contexts of precarious legal status. Although we cannot claim generalizability, we believe these insights are useful for other contexts too. Future research might expand this focus by examining the effects of biometric SIM card registration beyond the case of refugees—for instance, among excluded citizens without formal identification, whose lack of recognition in fact heightens their risk of being stateless. Underlining the link between communication access and biometric registration sheds light on the vulnerability of groups already at the margins. Digital connectivity should be treated as a basic right. When access to identity and registration systems depends on digital connectivity, this principle should inform the design of inclusive rather than exclusionary systems. Policymakers should evaluate whether securitization measures help to achieve inclusivity or to reinforce inequalities. Moreover, mindful of the intersectional approach applied in this study, programs and organizations collaborating with women or legally precarious groups should anticipate their exposure to higher risks and aim to promote and provide safer ways of access for marginalized and minority groups.

The digital euphoria includes the use of WhatsApp, which also raises critical ethical considerations. At the time of the research and writing of this article, public and academic scrutiny of WhatsApp's role in data extraction, metadata collection, and platform ownership by Meta (formerly Facebook) was less pronounced than it is today. Despite WhatsApp's vaunted end-to-end encryption, we exercised caution back then and did not share any sensitive data via the platform. Given the heightened ethical scrutiny surrounding digital platforms today, it is likely that our approach to digital communication, particularly to the use of WhatsApp, will be more critically assessed in the future.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

As non-native English speakers, the authors used ChatGPT by OpenAI to assist with language editing and text refinement.

Data Availability

Research data were stored by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) for a delimited amount of time.

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