



Technology access & education for refugee women

Workshop notes

February, 20th 2020
UW Othello Commons

This research and workshop are based in Seattle and its metropolitan area.

Key Facts about refugees in the US and Washington State

- Close to 70 million people are displaced around the world (UNHCR, 2018), of which 26 million of these individuals are refugees.
- In 2019, the US accepted 30,000 refugees for resettlement. Their top three countries of origin were Congo, Myanmar, and Ukraine.
- In 2020, the number of refugees to be resettled in the US has been set at 18,000. The lowest in the 40-year history of the US Refugee Resettlement Program.
- Washington State welcomed over 14,000 refugees in the past five years, and 1,930 refugees in 2019. The state consistently ranks in the top 10 US states for refugee resettlement.
- Seventy-two percent of the state's refugees came from just five countries: Iraq, Myanmar, Somalia, Bhutan & Ukraine.

On February 20th, 2020 twenty-six representatives from government agencies, public libraries, non-for-profits, resettlement organizations, and UW researchers convened for a half-day workshop at **UW Othello Commons** to discuss different strategies to improve technology access and education for refugee women in King County. The agenda for the workshop included a presentation and discussion of the main findings emerging from the research, co-design activities centered around four areas where some of the most pressing gaps in technology-related services exist, and a final session to outline a roadmap for future collaborations. This document presents a summary of the main points discussed during the workshop as well as the high level findings from the research.

About the research

The main objective of the research is to **understand the role of technology access and education for women who have arrived in Washington State as refugees**. As part of this research, we conducted interviews with twenty-one refugee service providers in King County in 2019. The purpose of these interviews was to map a landscape of technology-related services and programs available for refugee women and their communities, to identify the main challenges these organizations face, and the main needs for designing better programs and services for refugee communities.

Why the focus on technology access and education for refugee communities?

Refugees, asylees, and others who experienced what is often described as ‘forced migration’ are often among the most marginalized members of US society. **Technology access and education is an**

important way in which people from refugee backgrounds arriving to the United States learn to navigate systems of employment, transportation, schooling, legal and government services, and stay connected to their friends and families abroad. For women, these opportunities and social networks can be critical lifelines to more actively engage in the social, economic, and cultural life of their communities and their new home.

Why the focus on women?

Our focus on women and technology stems from an interest to **support and expose services available to refugee women in the United States, where technology is socially and culturally dominated by men.** There is ample research documenting the way men often make choices about and take control of technology (over girls and women). It is also well documented how the cultural norms around technology leave many women excluded, unable, or unmotivated to learn to use or master important 21st century tools, leaving many of them on the outskirts of technology. Exclusion and oppression are often exacerbated for women in migration, where language barriers, domestic responsibilities, isolation, and iterations of cross-cultural patriarchy prevail, placing them an even higher risk of social marginalization.

Summary of research findings

The summary of findings presented here are framed in relation to what kinds of technology programs stand out as critical to the lives of these women and their families in resettlement:

- A. Access to technology, particularly **digital technology, represents a foundational step in the refugee resettlement process.** Technology can support employment, facilitate language learning, mediate navigation around the city, and create connectedness, communication, and mobility for women.
- B. The most prominent programs and services that include a technology access and education can be broadly categorized into four main areas:
 - **Technology education and employment-related services:** including job search, CV preparation, entrepreneurship (i.e. home based child care); vocational and apprenticeship training programs (i.e industrial sewing, culinary programs); and professional development programs.
 - **Mobile phones, communication, and mobility** for women
 - Technology education and **English as Second Language (ESL) training;**
 - Technology **in family and community life**
- C. Current available funding does not meet the demand for technology education programs and is limited and inconsistently available year to year.
 - **Funding structures in relation to technology access and education programs place limitations** on what kinds of programs are available and who can benefit from

them. Resettlement agencies and community-based organizations tend to rely on restricted grants or other funding which dictates how and on what to use funds.

- There is a **lack of diverse funding sources** creating unnecessary competition among the different organizations that are already struggling to find resources for this type of programs.
- Technology companies' support for technology education programs - either through unrestricted funding, in-kind technology donations, and/or training resources - for refugee communities is barely available.

D. In addition to scarce and inconsistent funding, the **main challenges** refugee service providers face when working with women include:

- Meeting the needs of diverse cultural and language groups; attending different literacy levels, competing needs and priorities within the organizations; and social and cultural norms that could deter women from participating in different training programs.

E. Based on the organizations' collective intelligence, some of the **main areas where the most pressing gaps in technology-related services** are:

- Technology literacy, including **mobile and web literacy**, resources to teach online safety, privacy and surveillance, and programs that build skills in everyday technology such as driving and sewing.
- Programs fostering **entrepreneurship and self-employment**
- **Emergency preparedness**
- **Coordination and resource sharing** among refugee service organizations.

These four themes served as the basis for the design activities that participants engaged in during the second portion of the workshop.

Co-creating new programs and services | Group activities

Group 1: Technology literacy group

The technology literacy team discussed a women-centered learning initiative to increase parents' digital engagement with schools, regardless of the parents' literacy levels. For many families, using technology has become an essential part of engaging with the education system -- registering kids for school, checking grades online, communicating with teachers via email and mobile apps. Women without access or skills to engage digitally are at a disadvantage. Those who are preliterate are especially affected.

First steps for this work would involve building awareness around the issue and learning about interests and needs in the community. Partnerships with local organizations and trusted community members would be crucial. The main challenges would involve allocating funding and time for schools to tackle this work. The long-term goal is systems change.

Group 2: Entrepreneurship and self-employment

The entrepreneurship team designed a technology education program for pre-literate refugee women to learn how to operate modern sewing machines to produce home products such as pillow cases, napkins, table cloths, etc., targeting a more general customer base. The training program would include some foundations on design, online marketing and sales, and business development.

Group 3: Emergency preparedness

The emergency preparedness team discussed the design of a mobile app (Trusty - The response octopus) that brings together different key actors and resources - healthcare providers, community and faith-based organizations, public libraries, housing authorities, and food banks among others - that could support emergency response efforts in refugee communities.

The main challenges the team identified for a successful implementation of this kind of initiative were: mobile literacy, community trust in the organizations that are part of the network, and the mapping of community assets that are key in emergency response efforts.

Group 4: Coordination and resource sharing among refugee service providers

The coordination and resource sharing group talked about two interconnected pieces - the need to better collaborate among providers and streamlining services for refugee women. The group recognizes that collaboration must drive technology use - not vice versa. To put it another way, if organizations are not motivated to work with one another, no technology will change that. Also, the group decided that it would be good to start with a simple technology such as a LISTSERV, but who would manage the technology was left unanswered.

The group also talked about a way to increase the number of “warm handoffs” as refugee women move between services and providers. There was some discussion around what existing entity or organization could serve as a central, physical hub, but it was unclear which organization had the physical infrastructure and the high degree of trust that would make it feasible.

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