

GENDERED MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

Reflections and Recommendations
on Using a Sensemaking Approach

Report 2023

Reflections and Recommendations on Using a Sensemaking Approach to Understand Gendered Migration Experiences for Venezuelan Refugee/Migrant Women/Girls

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Photo Credit: @IOM Ecuador 2022

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ROUTES OF VENEZUELAN MIGRATION



About 7 million Venezuelans are currently displaced after fleeing the geopolitical and economic crisis within their country. Many are hosted in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil among other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

Both during their migration journey and in their host communities, Venezuelan women/girls (taken to include adolescents), face risks of gender-based violence (GBV) such as intimate partner violence (IPV), early unions, sexual assault, transactional sex, and harassment, as well as forced sex work, and survival sex to access basic goods and services. Like other parts of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic increased these risks for women/girls due to increased economic strain, living in closed quarters with potential abusers, reduced security, and restricted mobility resulting from public health preventative policies.



The International Organization for Migration (IOM) leads the humanitarian response to the Venezuelan crisis along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). IOM's anecdotal experience has highlighted that women/girls affected by GBV are often not able to access medical care and psychosocial support along the migration routes. Accessibility has been even further reduced as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of sexual and reproductive health services and mental health support means GBV survivors are at risk for unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and psychological distress. Thus, many women/girls suffer alone due to the stigma and shame experienced after GBV.



<https://www.iom.int/news/un-migration-agency-launches-regional-action-plan-strengthen-response-venezuelan-outflows>

For three years, IOM and Queen's University have been collaborating on a joint research initiative with the objective of providing more efficient mixed-method data regarding the GBV risks faced by Venezuelan women/girls, including sexual assault, survival sex, and human trafficking. The project's purpose was to improve the safety, well-being, and sexual and reproductive health of female Venezuelan refugees/migrants through more efficient data collection and analysis, allowing for more responsive programming.

Example of a sensemaking triad question in which respondents interpret and provide their own perspectives on the experience they shared.

METHODOLOGY

The Sensemaking Approach

To achieve our objective, we used an innovative 'sensemaking' approach with [Spryng.io](#) software. Sensemaking is based on the premise that storytelling is a natural way for people to convey complex information and that storytelling helps people to make sense of their experiences and the world around them. With a mixed-methods sensemaking survey, respondents are asked to audio-record a brief story in response to an open-ended prompt (in this case asking about the migration experiences of women & girls). These narratives, which generate the qualitative data, are often brief and are therefore referred to as micronarratives.

After sharing a migration experience in response to the open-ended prompt, respondents are then presented with a series of pre-defined questions that ask them to interpret what the shared experience meant to them by plotting their perspectives.

Líneas deslizantes

Coloca la pelota en la línea que mejor describa la experiencia compartida. Si una pregunta no aplica a tu experiencia, marca la casilla No corresponde / Prefiero no responder.

Previous

En la historia que compartió, ¿quién tenía el poder y el control?

Absolutamente todo la mujer o niña

Absolutamente otras pers

Los eventos en la historia...

Ocurrieron por haber salido de Venezuela

Habrían ocurrido de todas formas en Ven

La mujer / niña en la historia compartida...

Recibió demasiado apoyo / servicios

No recibió apoyo /servicios en absoluto

En la historia compartida, el futuro de la mujer / niña está...

Demographic and other contextualizing data are collected through multiple-choice questions. Spryng.io then quantifies each of the plotted points, providing statistical data linked to the accompanying micronarratives. By collecting many self-interpreted stories, sensemaking leverages the 'wisdom of the crowds,' and collectively, the participants' responses create a nuanced picture in the same way pixels come together to produce a clear image.

Example of a sensemaking slider question in which respondents interpret and provide their own perspectives on the experience they shared.



Sensemaking offers several unique advantages over more traditional research approaches:

First, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues by using indirect prompting questions to elicit more revealing responses. By avoiding asking direct questions, sensemaking allows stories to emerge from the broader landscape of experiences, thus situating them in the everyday lives of respondents while also decreasing the risk of participant retraumatization.

Second, in contrast to quantitative surveys, which ask respondents to choose between several discrete options, sensemaking provides more nuanced data because it allows for a much more extensive range of possible responses.

Third, sensemaking reduces social desirability bias because, within a given question, the possible responses are either all positive, negative, or neutral, with no one response being more socially acceptable than others.

Fourth, interpretation bias is also reduced because respondents interpret their own experiences.

Finally, because qualitative and quantitative data are collected digitally on hand-held tablets or smartphones and the narratives are audio-recorded and interpreted, sensemaking is a more efficient method of conducting mixed-methods research compared to more traditional approaches.



IOM enumerator facilitating a sensemaking interview in Ecuador



Photo credit: @IOM Ecuador 2022

Service provider workshop in Manta (July 2022) in which key insights from the study were shared with representatives from organizations responding to the Venezuelan migration crisis.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND VALIDATION



In July 2022 team members visited most of the data collection locations in Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil to host workshops with service providers. In total, seven workshops allowed us to engage with 120 service providers. The purpose of these validation workshops was to: (1) share key insights from the study with representatives from organizations responding to the Venezuelan migration crisis to help inform decision-making service provision and programming; (2) Investigate whether the study's findings were align with the experiences of service providers who work closely with the Venezuelan community; and (3) brainstorm about potential strategies to collectively address the gendered risks faced by Venezuelan women/girls during migration.

In addition to the workshops, the team also engaged with Venezuelan community members through 14 focus group discussions that included a total of 116 Venezuelan refugees/migrants. We hosted two focus group discussions exclusively with Indigenous community members and two groups exclusively with LGBTIQ+ community members. Similar to the service provider workshops, the purpose of the focus group discussions was to: (1) share key insights from the study directly with Venezuelan community members; (2) validate that the study's findings align with the experiences of Venezuelan refugees/migrants and are framed in an acceptable way; and (3) brainstorm about possible avenues to mitigate the gendered risks faced by Venezuelan women/girls during migration and strategize about how to better meet the needs of those who have been affected by GBV.

OVERVIEW OF STUDY'S FINDINGS

Data collection using a sensemaking approach was highly successful and far exceeded the team's original expectations. In total, we reached 9116 unique Venezuelan refugees/migrants who shared a total of 9339 migration micronarratives. Individuals could choose to share and interpret more than one migration experience and hence the reason the number of micronarratives exceeds the number of unique respondents.

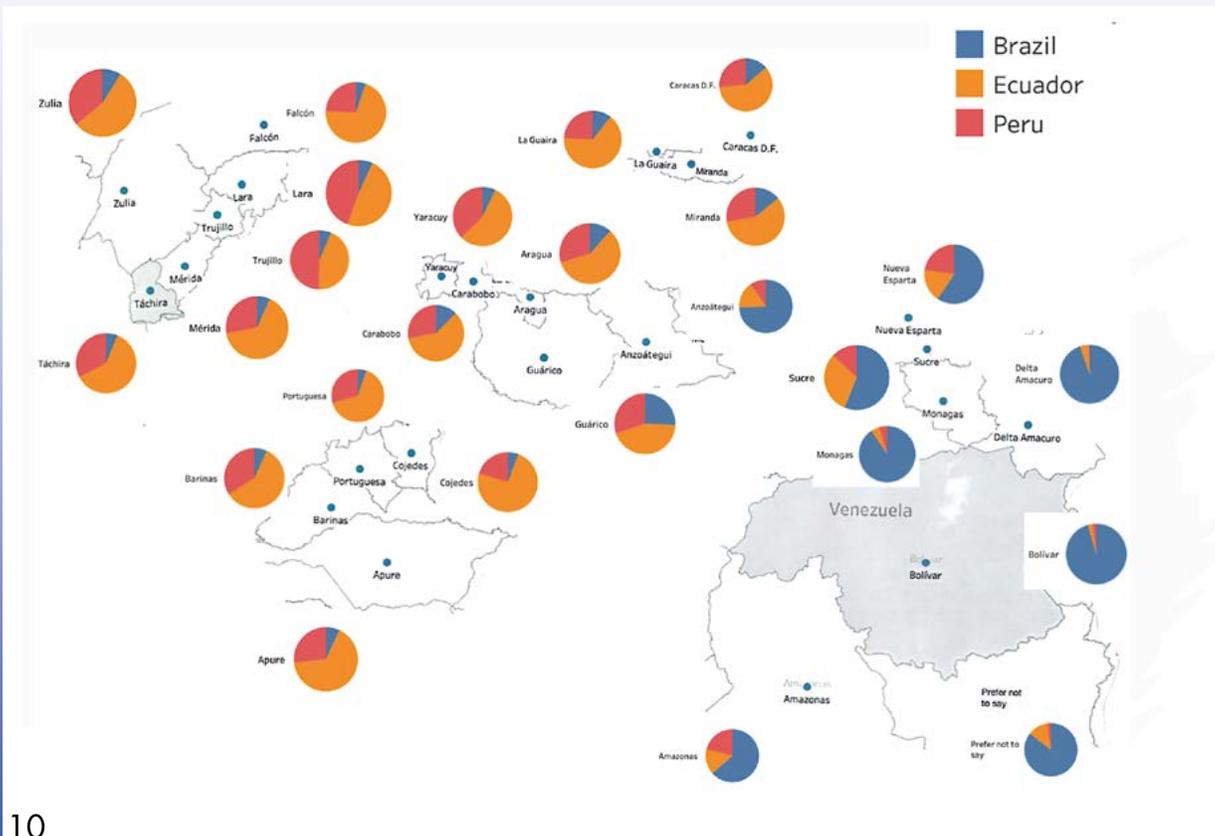


Photo Credit: @IOM Brazil 2022

We reached Venezuelan refugees/migrants in nine locations across three countries.



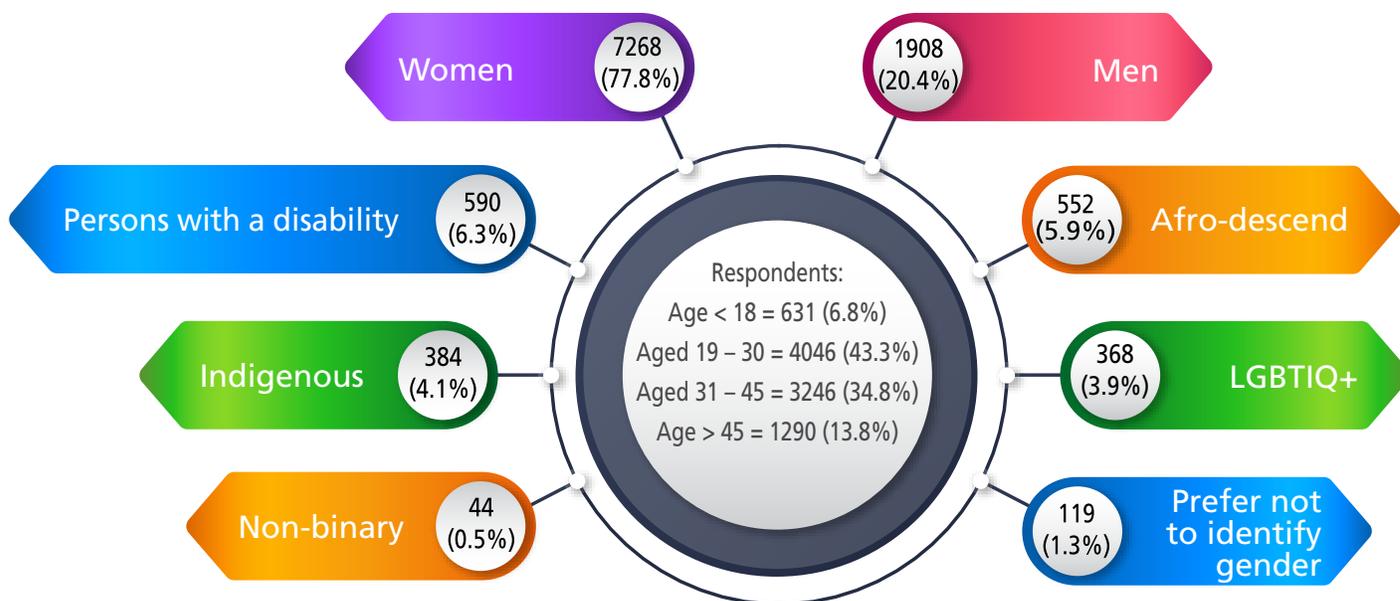
Participants came from many different locations in Venezuela



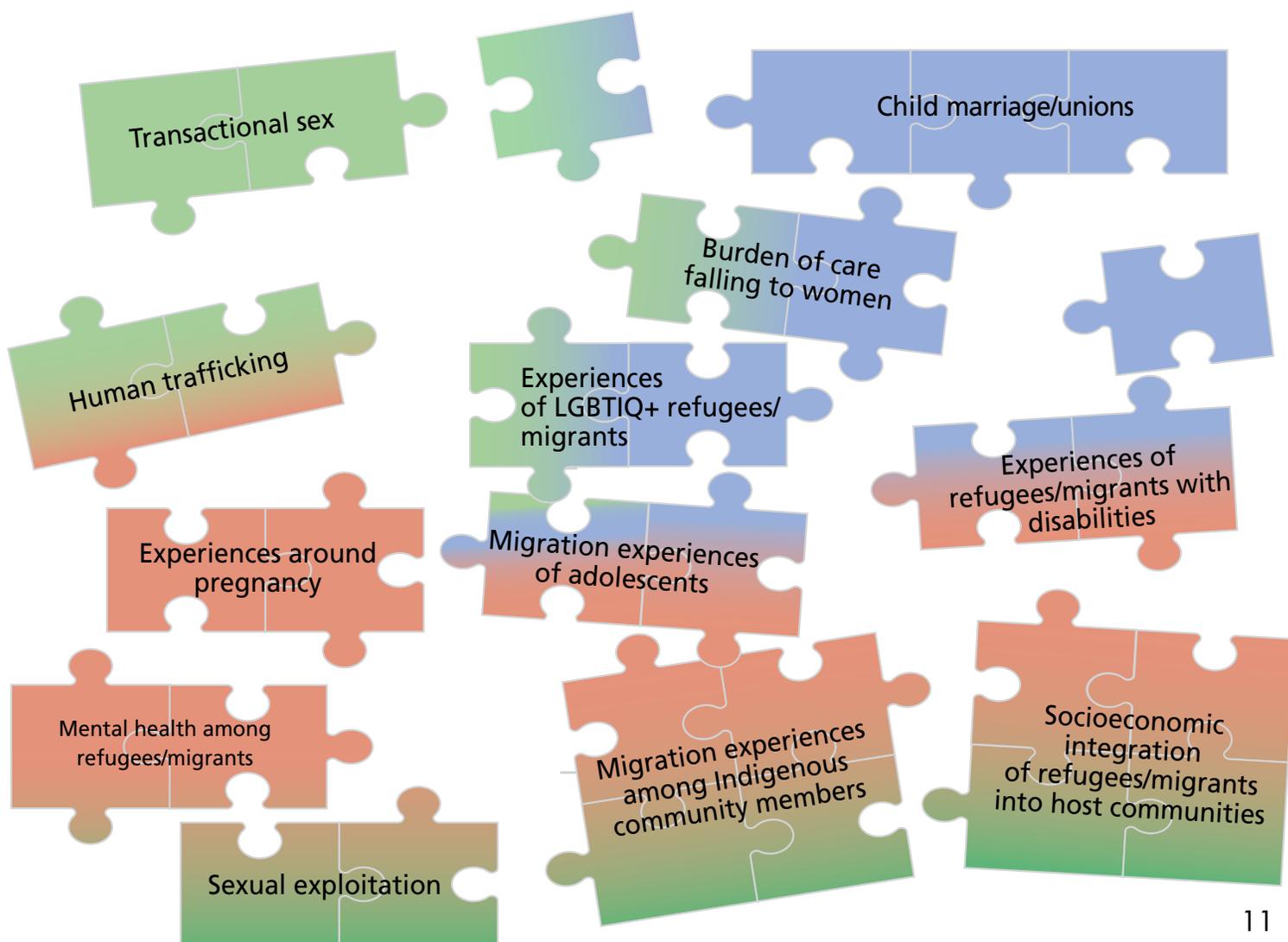
Map highlighting self-identified home region in Venezuela as well as the country where the sensemaking interview occurred.

Based on this map, we conclude that those in eastern Venezuela were more likely to migrate to Brazil, whereas those from central and western Venezuela were more likely to migrate to Ecuador or Peru.

A cross-section of respondents was reached including different ages and genders as well as members of equity-deserving groups.



A number of themes related to GBV and sexual and reproductive health were identified and prioritized for analysis. Analyses are currently underway and will be published as they are finalized. Prioritized topics include:



IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

COVID19-Related Delays and Implications

The project's start was initially delayed by a year because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Originally, the project had a commitment from five countries wishing to participate (Colombia, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador) with a goal of reaching 6,000 respondents in total. However, after the first year of the pandemic, both Colombia and the Dominican Republic were no longer able to participate and so the scope was reduced to three countries with a target of reaching 3,000 respondents. During the pandemic, many costs had increased particularly those involving fuel and travel. Additionally, the research teams now also required masks, hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes to clean the tablets between respondents to prevent transmission of COVID-19. Therefore, the budget originally allotted for the Dominican Republic and Colombia was reallocated for higher transportation costs and for COVID-19 personal protective equipment.

An in-person training with the research teams from Peru, Brazil, and Ecuador was planned for the autumn of 2021. However, with ongoing COVID-19 travel restrictions, required post-travel isolation policies, and the global impact of the Omicron wave, the training was subsequently postponed to January 2022 and switched to a blended format. It was blended in that in-country travel for the Peru and Brazil enumerators occurred but there was no national or international travel for Ecuador. A colleague on one of the country's enumeration teams tested positive for COVID-19 on day two of in-person training, requiring the whole team to complete the remainder of the training physically distanced and virtually from their homes/hotel rooms. Despite the immediate cancellation of further in-person training in that country, unfortunately, three others subsequently contracted COVID-19 from the exposure at the training venue. While this meant that the team was delayed by about 10 days before starting data collection, fortunately, no one became seriously ill. Despite the potential for many things to go wrong between technology, internet, and in-country travel, overall, the three-day training was a success with approximately 40 people across five countries participating in Spanish and English. It was important, however, that the enumeration team members have in-person time together to practise delivering the sensemaking survey.

Audio Files

Approximately 80% of all the collected narratives were audio recorded, while the remainder were typed on the tablet. We realized early in the data collection that the quality of the audio files was quite poor due to significant background noise. Most of the data was collected in outdoor public spaces such as border crossings, markets, transportation hubs, and points of service delivery. Therefore, it's not surprising that there was lots of ambient sound from road traffic, passerbys, etc. We provided feedback to the enumerator team recommending that whenever possible they move away from noisy areas and encourage the participant to hold the tablet microphone closer to their mouth while recording the narrative. Over time, the background noise on the audio recordings did diminish but is continued to be somewhat of a challenge.



Photo Credit: @IOM Ecuador, 2022

We also faced a challenge with missing audio files. Depending on the week, the percentage of missing audio files initially ranged from 2% to almost 30%, which was a great concern. From the beginning, we carefully tracked which enumerators were missing what audio files and followed up with those team members to see what challenges they were encountering while respondents were entering the data and when the data was being uploaded to the secure server. Team leads in each country also did field visits to help troubleshoot the issue (observing data entry, taking screenshots of potential issues, trying different internet connections for data upload, etc.). We also uploaded test data from Canada to see if we could recreate the issue as details about when/where the audio files were missing was needed by the Spryng.io team to further investigate from their side. Unfortunately, we were unable to recreate the missing audio files and the working theory is that longer audio files failed to upload when the internet connection was unstable. To mitigate the risk of losing more audio files, in the later phases of data collection, the enumeration teams tried to upload the data from the IOM office or other location where the internet connection tended to be more reliable. In the last weeks of data collection, the percentage of missing audio files had stabilized in the 2-7% range.

Emotional Toll on Enumerators

The initial training for enumerators had two sessions on psychological first aid including self-care. However, the experiences shared by Venezuelan refugees/migrants who participated in the study were often about violence and loss, and it is therefore not surprising that enumerators wellbeing was affected. This was particularly true for enumerators from Venezuela who were themselves refugees/migrants. To mitigate the impact on mental health of the enumerators, several measures were implemented. These included hosting a second psychological first aid session for the team, encouraging enumerators to reduce the number of interviews that they were doing per day, recommending taking a break between interviews (for example to go for a walk, have a snack, talk to a friend), and taking time off as needed. These measures helped and the enumerations teams were better able to care for themselves in the second half of the data collection despite the disturbing nature of many of the experiences shared by Venezuelan refugees/migrants.





IOM team engaging with Venezuelan refugees/migrants in Ecuador

Photo Credit: @IOM Ecuador 2022

We had aimed to collect 3,000-3,500 narratives over 10 weeks and had budgeted for their transcription and translation. However, we far exceeded our original data collection goal with 9,339 narratives from 9,116 unique respondents over 12 weeks. This meant that there was not enough budget to cover the transcription and translation of all the data. We tried several different routes of transcription and translation to identify a solution, getting different estimates and quotes. Unfortunately, all the avenues we explored were so expensive that transcribing and translating the whole dataset was not feasible with the given budget. Additionally, it was estimated that transcription and translation would take months to complete if done manually by humans and this did not align with the project's goals because we wanted to provide data promptly to inform responsive decision making.

As a result of these challenges, we ultimately turned to artificial intelligence (AI) to process the thousands of transcriptions and translations more efficiently and to do so within our budget. In a comparative pilot test, we had audio files transcribed and translated on several different AI platforms and then compared the results with those from a professional (human). We identified a platform that we believed was adequate for initial transcription and translation ([Sonix.ai](#)) and used it to process the audio files. This was a cumbersome process, however, because we

had to download and organize thousands of audio files from the Spryng.io server, upload them to the Sonix.ai platform, download the transcribed and translated micronarratives, and then integrate them back into the master data files for analysis. The AI transcriptions and translations are being used in our initial mixed-methods analysis but any narratives being included in final results presentation are being first verified for accuracy by a human translator fluent in both English and Spanish.



Photo Credit: @IOM Perú 2022
Service provider workshop in Tumbes, Perú (July 2022)

While this extra step can be time-consuming, we felt it was necessary before publishing the results. An additional consequence of this approach to transcription and translation is that the initial analyses are being conducted using transcriptions and translations that may not be entirely accurate and the respondents' intended meaning may sometimes not be appreciated.



16 *Service provider workshop in Pacaraima, Brazil (July 2022)*

Photo Credit: @IOM Brazil 2022

It is worth noting that during the course of the current project, Spryng.io did introduce an AI transcription and translation feature within their platform. Moving forward, this option would be more convenient as it would avoid having to download the audio files, use a third-party program for transcription and translation, and then integrate the micronarratives back into the dataset for analysis. While the quality of Spryng's transcription and translation remains to be seen, we assume that it will be

comparable to other AI technology such as that of Sonix.ai. Spryng.io now also provides human transcription and translation within their platform. While this offers great convenience and avoids having to download the audio files and subsequently integrate the micronarratives, it would still not have been a feasible option for the current project given the associated costs and the amount of time that would have been required.



Data Management

While it was valuable to have engaged with so many Venezuelan research participants, the volume of data collected created some data management challenges. For instance, it was difficult to identify which micronarratives were about particular topics, such as human trafficking or sexual exploitation, that had been prioritized for analysis. Given that there were over 9,300 micronarratives, it was not feasible to include them all in qualitative or mixed-methods analysis.

In earlier sensemaking studies, we had sometimes included multiple-choice questions at the end that asked the participant if their shared micronarrative was about topic A, B, or C. However, when the topics of interest are nuanced and complex (as are many forms of GBV including human trafficking and sexual exploitation), respondents may not always recognize the issue or have the same understanding of the issue as the research team. To circumvent this, in other studies we have instead asked the enumerator to indicate at the end of the interview, if the micronarrative was about topic A, B, or C. However, despite additional training around the complexities and nuances that our team was interested in, some enumerators struggled to accurately identify which micronarratives were about which GBV topics. Furthermore, if

their literacy skills and comfort with technology are sufficient, respondents can complete the sensemaking survey independently. In those cases the enumerator would not have heard the shared micronarrative and therefore would not have been able to respond to these questions regarding whether the micronarrative was about particular topics.

To keep the survey brief and address the above challenges with having either the participant or the enumerator identify the micronarrative topic, in the current work, we decided to remove almost all of the multiple-choice questions that would have served this purpose. Instead, we had planned to request that the transcriptionist, someone with whom IOM had worked extensively on GBV-related projects and who had a good understanding of the nuances around different forms of GBV, identify micronarrative topics at the time of transcription. The transcriptionist's prior knowledge and understanding was to have been supplemented by a brief training around the specific definitions that our team was using for the purposes of this project. Unfortunately, this approach was no longer possible after we had to go with AI transcription and translation given lack of budget, capacity, and time to have a human transcribe and translate all 9339 micronarratives.



Service provider workshop in Lima, Peru (July 2022)

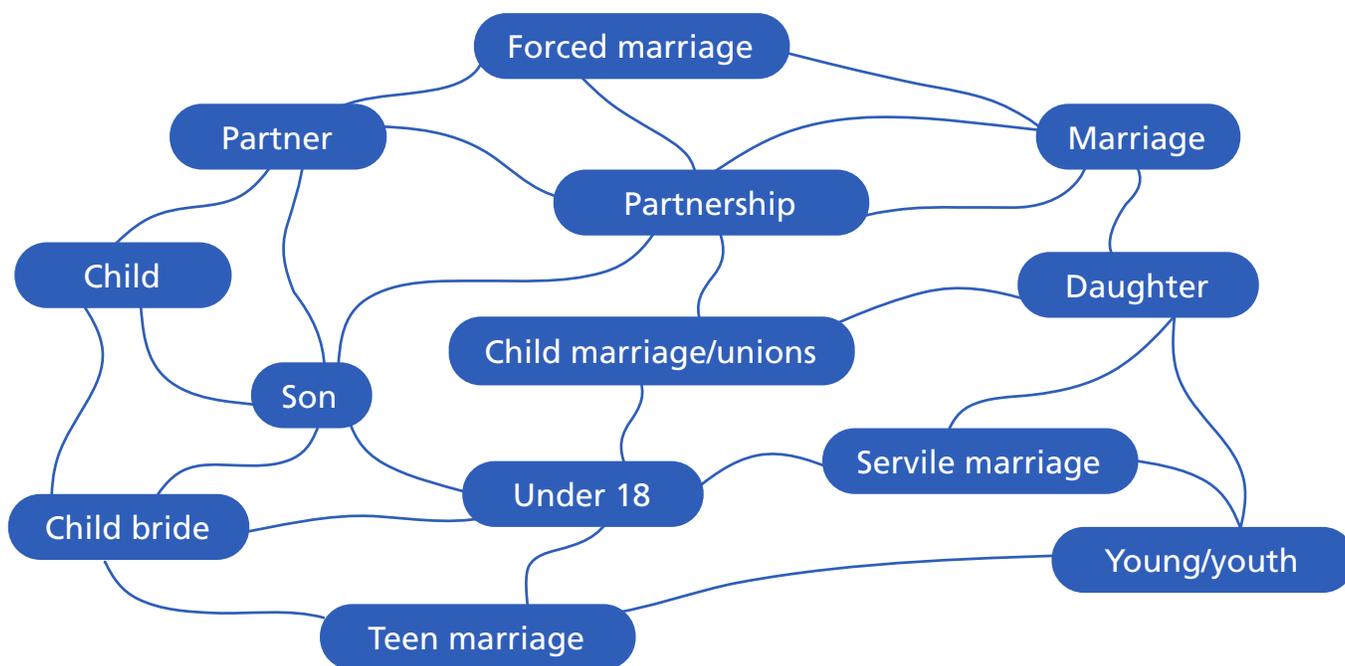
Photo Credit: @IOM Perú 2022



Service provider workshop
in Lima, Perú (July 2022)

Photo Credit: @IOM Perú 2022

In our approach to this data management dilemma, we decided to use key word searches to identify which micronarratives were about particular topics of interest so that subgroups could be created for data analysis. To do this, we used Atlas.ti's sophisticated search function to identify particular topics of interest. For example, the search terms used to identify which micronarratives were about child marriage/unions are provided below.



This approach is not without limitations though. Undoubtedly, some micronarratives would have been missed in the process particularly given that we focused the key word searches on English terms. Since the micronarratives were originally shared in Spanish, some nuances would have been lost in translation. However, given the large number of micronarratives that we are working with, we believe it likely that data saturation will have been reached for most topics.

Summary of Recommendations

Overall, the data collection was a success, largely due to the hard work and dedication of the enumeration teams in Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. Without them this research would not have been possible and the whole team is immensely grateful to them and to the team leads who helped to oversee the process.

Based on our experience shared here, we note the following considerations and recommendations for future sensemaking work:



1 Team training - semi-virtual training worked well in this case, but all respondents had access to a reasonable wi-fi connection at the time. In the future and with similar internet connectivity, the success of our virtual training in this project questions whether travel for in-person training is really required. Like other aspects of our work, COVID-19 has highlighted that we can do more virtually than we have historically thought possible.



2 COVID-19 - although there was a COVID-19 exposure during training which resulted in transmission to three other colleagues, overall the project demonstrated that when appropriate prevention measures are taken (vaccinated enumerators, masks, hand sanitizer, and sanitizing wipes), field data collection can be conducted safely from a COVID-19 perspective.



3 Internet connectivity and loss of data - a reliable internet connection is important for uploading Spryng.io data and we attribute the missing audio files to more unstable wi-fi connections in the field. For future projects, it will be important to consider where and how the data is uploaded to mitigate this issue.



4 Self-care - we recommend planning periodic self-care sessions for enumeration teams while also taking other measures to improve well-being including frequent breaks, reducing workload, and taking time off to rest and recuperate. Access to counselors and positive reinforcement may also be helpful.





Community engagement session in Lima, Peru (July 2022)

Photo Credit: @IOM Perú 2022



5 Transcription and Translation - when collecting a large volume of narrative data, transcribing and translating all the narratives may not be feasible. This is particularly relevant when only a relatively small proportion of that data will be used in the final analysis. In this case, we have turned to an AI solution with verification by a human expert for any narratives that are ultimately included in the study's findings. Use of an external microphone and being able to collect the data indoors in quieter spaces, is recommended to improve transcription and translation quality.



6 Sensemaking's suitability for studying sensitive issues - we believe that the sensemaking approach is well suited to inquiries about sensitive issues like GBV. In this project, the level of respondents' openness to disclosing difficult issues was remarkable. Furthermore, many respondents enjoyed sharing their perspectives through a more user friendly/innovative methodology although there were a few cases of respondents being concerned about having their voices recorded.



7 Rapid analysis and feedback of data for responsive decision-making - using the approach outlined above, we were not really able to analyse data and provide prompt results back to service providers. While the project was still efficient in comparison to more traditional approaches, the timelines were longer than we would ideally want them to be. If we were to implement this same project again and had the resources, we would hire a full-time data manager/analyst for each of the three

countries where data was collected. We believe this would allow more comprehensive analysis and prompter turnaround for more responsive decision-making to address GBV threats and support those affected by GBV. This would require a period of training on sensemaking methodology, the Spryng.io platform, data manipulation, mixed-methods analysis, etc. but we believe this would better facilitate the 'real-time' monitoring that we had initially envisioned. Furthermore, the data managers/analysts should strategically be individuals either with lived experience in the humanitarian crisis or someone with first-hand experience responding to or working in the crisis. In addition to having the language skills to monitor the data more easily in the language that it was collected in, this would also be key for having the contextual knowledge to understand the data and more easily recognize what is new information, what is relevant, and what ought to be prioritized for prompt feedback to service providers, governments, community members and other stakeholders.



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