



Interviewer:

Rosie Afia, Market Engagement Manager at GSMA

Guest:

Claudia Simler, former COO at [REFUNITE](#)

Intro *You're listening to the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme's podcast.*

Rosie: Welcome, everyone, to our pilot podcast series on innovation in the humanitarian space. This episode is a deep-dive into issues surrounding gender and inclusivity. I'm Rosie, a Market Engagement Manager for the Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Programme (M4H) at the GSMA.

Gender and inclusivity is one of our five core themes in the M4H programme. And for a bit of additional context, M4H is exploring how mobile-enabled solutions can reduce the gender gap in access to digital humanitarian services, and enhance quality and accessibility for vulnerable segments of the population.

This is a great opportunity to look at this topic because, as we know, forced migration and complex emergencies impact women, girls, men, and boys very differently. This can be linked to differences in the vulnerabilities of each of those groups and other complex factors that impact vulnerability like disability, health, sexuality, and age.

We're here in Northern Uganda in Gulu, visiting Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. And I'm delighted to be joined by Claudia Simler - COO of REFUNITE. Welcome, Claudia. Great to have you.

Can you tell us a little bit about your work with [REFUNITE](#)?

Claudia: REFUNITE is short for Refugees United. We are a non-profit foundation focusing on addressing the issue of refugee family separation. So, specifically, we use digital platforms and tools to reconnect separated family members. We do this through a global online database where family members can register and search for their missing loved ones.

Rosie: That's great. You've been with REFUNITE for nearly eight years. What is it about this topic and this work that's kept you so engaged?

Claudia: The issue of family separation is an overlooked issue within the humanitarian space. And it is so because many other pressing challenges often come before the issue of reconnecting separated family members. But I do think that engaging with refugees on the ground and realising what family means to them and their psychological and social well-being, I think that has been a driving factor in my work. I've had the pleasure over the years to really visit a lot of different refugee camps and settlements and engage with end users who have shared their stories...

...When you realise what the lack of access to family means and then bringing a solution to that problem, I think that has been a motivating driving force for our work, for my work.

Rosie: When we're talking about solutions in humanitarian assistance, we know that it's designed and delivered with the primary objective of saving lives and alleviating suffering. And yet, we still hear this common argument that paying attention to gender issues is just not timely or practical in the field. And we know that UNHCR estimates around 75% of refugees are women, and that women are 14 times more likely to be impacted by the devastation of a complex emergency or a natural disaster. Maybe you can tell us a little bit about your experience working on this topic with women refugees in particular.

Claudia: I think what we see across the sub-Saharan region where we work is it's still a very male-dominated family structure. And so we do see that with the work we do that is specifically mobile phone enabled, women are still at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing different services. Men will still be in charge of a household, they will be the ones with an access to a mobile phone, often the only one in the household. It means, effectively, that more of our users are men than women, but it doesn't mean that the issue of family separation is less prevalent for women. So from our perspective, there is definitely still a large gender gap when it comes to providing equal access to a service like ours, but, also, any service really that is provided through a digital platform or a mobile-based platform.

Rosie: So when you're trying to target people, are there any specific subgroups that you think deserve additional attention? And how do you think mobile technology could support their inclusion?

Claudia: Like I said, it's often difficult because a household will often have one mobile phone, and that mobile phone will be in the hands of the household male figure. And so how do you bring programmes to women or people who don't have cell phones? It's almost ... it's in infrastructure problem, but it's also a cultural problem. It's a very hard one to tackle because, at the end of the day, it's a question about changing those social norms around who gets access to information, who gets access to more power, if you will.

What studies have shown, specifically in this area, though which I find interesting in the context of displacement is that the very fact of being displaced often changes these cultural patterns of male domination within the household. So you will see, sometimes, refugee women being more entrepreneurial just because they have to in order for the family to survive. And that starts breaking down some of these entrenched social structures where the male is dominating a household.

It's an interesting dynamic where you can argue that, in some respects, displacement actually might drive more inclusivity for women. But I think the access problem to mobile phones, in and of themselves, is also, of course, tied to income, and that's a tricky one, too. So I think it's a multi-faceted problem, and I think there's not one silver bullet to really say what is going to drive more women to have mobile phones. But it's probably a good mix of having more income, more disposable income, having also, again, literacy, becoming more educated in order to benefit from these services. And then the cultural norms and para dynamics, whether that displacement effect will really have a longer-term impact on changing that is ... it's an open question, I think.

Rosie: So it sounds like you're saying access to mobile technologies is really a challenge in some of these specific contexts. And at the same time, mobile phones and, therefore, mobile operators have a role to play in empowering certain segments of refugee populations and providing livelihoods. Have I understood that correctly? That's your fundamental belief: mobile technology has a critical role to play here.

Claudia: I think mobile technology has a role to play when it comes to information access. Information is often the key to a greater sense of empowerment. So, I think one of the key barriers is still unless, let's say women specifically, are able to engage with that content that is available to them, potentially through a mobile phone, they're still not going to benefit from it. But, assuming the literacy levels are high enough to read and meaningfully extract value from what they can access, when it comes to services, I do think that mobile phones have a huge role to play. And I think, specifically, what we're seeing is that women do have access to a mobile phone, and especially with all the new financial services that are available through mobile phones, it gives them much more power when it comes to making economic decisions for the family, for the household. They are the ones who can use mobile phones to pay for sanitation services or water or electricity. They can start saving via their mobile phone.

So I do think mobile technology has a role to play, but it, obviously ... it also implies a certain level of literacy and even technology proficiency, if you will, to truly and meaningfully engage with that mobile technology. So I think there is a lot of work still to be done in terms of how do we upskill those women at the very bottom when it comes to just basic skills for them to truly take advantage. But once we get even those groups up to a certain level, I do think mobile technology has the power to unlock many more opportunities for women.

Rosie: And we know that when we engage with technology, it's very much gendered. And broadly speaking, the digital divide persists among low-income men and women more prevalently than it does in higher-income countries.

So, maybe I can just tell you about the GSMA's Connected Women program who have done some research recently around women in low and middle-income countries who are 10% less likely to own a mobile phone, on average. And the programme has published information that shows the main barrier to gender inclusion are around access, affordability, safety, usability, and relevance as to what they're going to get on the platform, which very much echoes what you've just said around barriers to access and the challenges that are faced here.

Do you see similar patterns within the refugee communities you're working with in terms of these barriers that the Connected Women programme has called out?

Claudia: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's echoing some of what I've mentioned earlier. I think what we often see is that it won't just be one person in each household having access to a mobile phone. With that said, these other studies also show that displacement, in and of itself, can sometimes change these power structures and actually allowing women to do more than they would have done in their home countries. But I think, at the end of the day, it is also just a socioeconomic issue, an issue of affordability. So how much of it is cultural and just the one male person of the household owning a cell phone, and how much it's socioeconomic? I think it's probably a good mix. I think ...

Rosie: Any other barriers, specifically, that you've seen in your work generally?

Claudia: Yeah, again, cultural and tied to income levels, disposable income. Even though now initiatives are coming out with operators launching very cheap mobile phones, I believe MTN Uganda has just launched a \$20 smartphone. So, of course, these types of initiatives will be really interesting to follow and see - does the affordability issue go away with \$20 smartphones on the market? And I guess, looking at the adoption of those types of cheap smartphones will also be an indicator of how much of the issue is tied to just pure socioeconomic factors, and how much of the issue is tied more to cultural norms around whether women should have access to more information. I think that will be interesting to follow.

Rosie: So we're here in Northern Uganda. We know from UNHCR that Uganda hosts between 1 and 1.4 million refugees. There's been around a 30% increase since 2017, and I actually believe that that's going up ahead of the elections in Congo at the minute. Can you tell us a bit about what we're doing here? And maybe about why I'm here as well?

Claudia: We've actually just launched a pilot project which is allowing refugee populations to get connected to digital work through their mobile phones.

It's a work where we collaborate with large tech companies to outsource their data work to refugees in Uganda. We believe that connecting refugees to dignified work is one of the best ways of empowering them and giving them access to a stream of income that they didn't have access to before. The pilot is really a test of how much can you, over time, change a refugee household's disposable income once they have access to more steady work than they've had access to before. We know that a lot of the refugees that are based in the settlements, and even in the larger cities in Uganda, don't really have any steady income. They hustle a lot. It's odd jobs and day jobs that really provides for what they can put on the table at night.

We believe if we can start including these refugee groups into the global gig economy, really, we think that can be quite transformative. And so, obviously, the pilot is also a test of how much you can do with mobile phones and how much you can achieve when it comes to doing meaningful work on a mobile phone. And we're already seeing some interesting results with our initial cohort of users where we see both young men and young women engaging with our service and finding it quite interesting. That's what we do.

Rosie: We were in the settlement yesterday doing a workshop, and it was great to see users being on-boarded and trying out the new system. Do you see any specific challenges? Did you pick up on anything around getting more women engaged? Do you see anything specific that maybe we need to think about when trying to include more women refugees into this pilot?

Claudia: Yeah. I think we're definitely naturally seeing a great interest from young men, and young men will then speak to their friends and bring more young men to us. I think we do need to just be careful in how we select our ambassadors on the ground, if you will. I think we have some strong female figures within our first cohort of users, and I think just paying attention to them and leveraging their position within their respective refugee communities will be important to just make sure we have a balanced user base, and also a balanced inclusion of refugee women into the work that we have them do.

Rosie: Great. If our listeners wanted to find out a bit more about REFUNITE, where should they go? How can they keep up-to-date with you?

Claudia: People can find REFUNITE's website, Twitter, Facebook, by searching for [REFUNITE](#) on the web. We're still working on getting more information on our latest digital inclusion, digital and financial inclusion, project online. But that will be up there, hopefully, very soon so people can follow also the digital employment part of what we do.

Rosie: Great. Well, we need to get on the road back to Kampala. So I'll just say thank you so much, Claudia, for your time and for talking to us.



And to our listeners, if anyone wants to find out more information about the Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme at GSMA, you can go to www.gsma.com/M4H. Thanks so much for listening.

Outro

You're listening to the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme's podcast. Our mission is to accelerate the delivery and impact of digital humanitarian assistance. We aim to reach 6 million people with improved access to and use of life-enhancing mobile-enabled services during humanitarian and disaster preparedness response and recovery by 2021. The [GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation](#) programme marks an evolution and expansion of the GSMA's Disaster Response work.