

RESEARCH

FOR THE WORLD

Collaborating in a pandemic: empowering migrant women in Colombia to tell their stories?

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Dr Sonja Marzi is an LSE Fellow in the Department of Methodology and an Associate Academic at the Latin America and Caribbean Centre. Her research is interdisciplinary, cutting across the fields of geography, anthropology and sociology, and focuses on gendered urban challenges and inequalities in Colombia.

Despite the mass disruption caused by COVID-19 as it swept around the world, **Sonja Marzi** was determined it would not delay her research with women in Medellín. But how do you make a participatory video when travel is restricted, cities quarantined and the team are half the world away from those they hope to film?

On 6 March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Colombia. By 6 April, the first of a number of lockdowns was called, a move echoed by governments around the world, severely restricting people's movements and closing whole industries. While the majority of film shoots were put on hold, however, one research film project took a different approach.

"My research is participatory, meaning I co-produce films with the people I am studying," explains Dr Sonja Marzi. "The people I work with are women, heads of households with caring responsibilities who often work in the informal economy, and it is their experiences that I'm particularly interested in."

An LSE Fellow in the Department of Methodology, Dr Marzi takes a collaborative approach to her research, using cutting-edge audio-visual and digital methods. Her plan was to spend six to eight weeks working with migrant women in the city of Medellín to create a film, in collaboration with a professional film crew and the women participants, exploring the challenges they face while negotiating the city. When it became clear that travel restrictions could be in place for some time, however, she had to choose between shelving the project or refocusing her research.



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Reacting to the pandemic – proposing a new methodological approach

"I felt a responsibility to the women we'd agreed to film with," explains Dr Marzi. "It also became really apparent to me, when I started to look at alternatives, that we often shift to extractive methodologies when we have emergencies like this – we do surveys or interviews, but we rarely hear directly from the people who are most affected. We know that women are often amongst those most impacted groups during disasters, so we decided to focus the film around the impact the pandemic was having on their everyday lives. We just had to get creative to do it."

While a new topic suggested itself quite easily, producing a documentary collaboratively in lockdown would be a greater challenge. With travel impossible, Dr Marzi made the decision to shift to a completely remote, participatory video design, with the women taking sole responsibility for filming, using smart phones.

"It required a lot of commitment and we had no clue how it would end," she says. "But I was also in a very rare position as an academic, which was to be able to test and trial something new, with no idea what the outcome might be and a risk to fail."



The beauty of the remote participatory aspect is that it gave the women a lot of power over what they filmed – much more so than if we had been there to facilitate the project in person. ”

Harnessing the positives of remote working

The team's first job was to recruit women for the project. Using WhatsApp, 14 were recruited, of which 12 saw through the project from start to finish. Workshops and technical training were delivered through Zoom and co-facilitated by participatory video practitioners (Spectacle) and Colombian filmmakers and researchers, with care taken to ensure that informed consent was obtained.

"We needed to ensure they understood the project, but also the ethical and risk implications, because the final film would be seen all around the world," says Dr Marzi. "I did wonder if they would be worried about potential exposure, but they weren't concerned at all. I think this is one of the big strengths of this new method we have developed. The beauty of the remote participatory aspect is that it gave the women a lot of power over what they filmed - much more so than if we had been there to facilitate the project in person."

Participant women were also in control of the editorial decision making process which helped increase the women's confidence as they worked to tell their stories, Dr Marzi believes, and the project has also helped improve their practical skills. Women who, in May 2020, were technical novices, are now frequently connecting through Zoom, making sophisticated filmmaking choices.

Dr Marzi stresses that every step of the process has been completely collaborative, with the women choosing exactly what shots to include and how to edit their footage together. “One of the huge positives of this new methodology is that it has really empowered the women filming their own experiences,” she says. “We really tried to make the remote-aspect work for us in this way, so we called them directors and gave them complete control over what footage would go into the film. I have not been involved in the final editing stage at all, so it really is their story to tell now.”

How do the women of Medellín represent their COVID realities? Watch this teaser for *Reinventadas*

It has been fascinating seeing what stories the women choose to tell, Dr Marzi explains.

“It was their decision to call the film *Reinventadas*, which means “reinvent ourselves”, and they chose to first highlight the difficulties they faced, but then to shift to the positives of the experience – how they spent more time with their families, how resilient they are. There’s a lot of strength in what they’re telling us.”

“One of the most explored topics, for example, was gardening and the importance of green spaces in the city. Much of it has to do with food security, but they also chose to explore the issue of mental health, and using these green spaces as a kind of refuge within the city, within being locked down. It’s fascinating.”

Building on this new methodology in audio-visual participatory research

Having had success with the first remote project, Dr Marzi is now focusing on developing this methodology funded by an ESRC grant.

“Usually we would go to the country - and there are reasons for that such as building rapport and trust - but that does also come with a neo-colonial lens. We, the Western researchers, are still going to countries, often in the global south, and there are still power imbalances that we can’t really equalise in the field,” she says.

“Having to work remotely really helped empower the participants, and so I’m now focused on developing this methodology with women in Medellín and also Bogotá, where we have no contacts whatsoever. This will help us investigate how we recruit online, particularly in places we’ve not been before, how we might mitigate for certain sample biases when we can’t be there and so on.”

There are also questions to explore around how audio-visual data is used remotely. “We don’t always have to produce a film” she concludes. “What are the other ways footage can be used? What do we want this participatory approach to result in? Does it even need an external audience, or are there other ways we can gain from the collective work?”

All important questions, but ones that might not even be on the agenda had the pandemic not necessitated a re-think in methodology, just one year ago. ■

Dr Sonja Marzi was speaking to Jess Winterstein, Deputy Head of LSE Media Relations.

Find out more about [Co-producing knowledge during emergencies and pandemics: developing remote participatory methods using smartphones](#).

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