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Worker Empowerment in the Era of Sharing Economy Platforms in Global South

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory paper we discuss the relation between empowerment and global sharing economy in a Global Southern context. We distinguish two primary meanings of 'empowerment' namely, the liberation from oppression and the ability to act. We inspect working for sharing economies from both angles. A critical factor for assessing whether sharing economies are empowering for global South workers is the change it brings. If the platform work offers opportunities for formerly unemployed, the change is considered as empowering. However, it is possible, that these platform jobs instead replace the traditional, more protected employments, in which case the change is considered dis-empowering. We exemplify our arguments with a contextual inquiry into community-based tourism in a small village Tanzania.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models**; • **Social and professional topics** → Geographic characteristics.

KEYWORDS

multi-sided platforms, global south, user empowerment

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1 INTRODUCTION

Recently, the role of global sharing platforms in the context of development has been brought to discussion [24]. While the platforms offer possibilities to create new livelihoods for users in the global south, it is equally likely that this new type of economy would further the exploitation of the underprivileged communities by actors from the global north. Participatory design (PD) as a field has been engaged in workers' empowerment since its origin in the

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Scandinavian labour unions 1970's [38]. Since many sharing platforms deal with generating livelihoods, the PD community should be interested to improve the working conditions of the users of these platforms. Thus [2] based on the risk of the sharing economy "exploiting legislation loopholes and undermining labour rights" promote a shift from sharing to caring as a political stance. This concept has been further expanded within a PD context by Teli et al. [37].

In this paper, we examine the nature of global south user empowerment in the context of global platforms. The aim of this paper is to explore whether the emergence of global digital platforms can be considered to be empowering for the users utilising them to earn a livelihood. We begin by exploring the concept of user empowerment, and the nature of digital platforms. We then discuss the concept of user empowerment in the context of digital platforms, and briefly present our learnings from our fieldwork with rural Tanzanians, who earn money as hosts registered on a global community-based tourism platform. We conclude by suggesting future research agendas.

2 EMPOWERMENT IN HCI AND ICT4D

Empowerment is a concept that has evaded exact definition [31]. The Cambridge Dictionary explains that empowerment is *the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you* [6]. Both human-computer interaction (HCI) and information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) research have been interested in how to design digital services which are empowering for their users. In the HCI literature, (user) empowerment often appears to be intertwined with the technology itself, with the assumption that creating better software systems results in greater empowerment of the users. Kinnula et al. have presented five differing views on empowerment used in the ICT4D research discourse, namely management/mainstream, critical, democratic, functional, and educational/competence [22]. They state that all these views focus on different areas of participation while neglecting others. Schneider et al. in turn has identified four axis for differentiating different streams of literature regarding to empowerment in HCI: concept of power, psychological component, persistence of empowerment, and design mindset, which differ in the understanding of empowerment from the HCI literature [35].

What empowerment means for the user in practice can have several interpretations. However, two primary ways to understand empowerment emerge from the literature. Empowerment can either lead to *power to act more efficiently*, or to *liberation from oppression*. From Schneider et al.'s axis, only one, namely the "concept of power" discusses the very nature of empowerment. It is separated

in power-to and power-over [35]. This distinction closely matches the division made in this paper.

In Kinnula et al.'s work, the power to act is reflected in mainstream, functional and educational views of empowerment. They emphasise the new skill acquisition as empowering factor while neglecting "liberation of people from oppression and false consciousness". Liberation from oppression is in turn reflected in critical and democratic views, which emphasize the people's ability to improve their position in society. [22]

Empowerment being the power to act in new ways, is facilitated through either learning of new skills, or by adopting new technology. For example, teaching elderly people to use computers empowers them by better allowing them to communicate with relatives and friends [11]. Mobile technologies can be used to empower the youth by providing them reproductive health information [18]. Also, adoption of mobile phones offer their marginalised users possibilities to empowerment, although those possibilities are limited due to technology's inability to impact the factors that have marginalised its users in the first place [34].

Empowerment as a liberation is a viewpoint, which is especially prevalent in critical theory [22]. The goal of empowerment is to recognise and overcome oppressing factors. Focusing on economic empowerment through education and technology might still leave the non-wealthy behind, as they might not be able to capitalize on the possibilities without enhancements of their political and social agency [8]. These types of oppression might be related to, for example, under-representation in democracy, poorness, or ownership of means of production. It has been questioned, whether this kind of empowerment can even be achieved in a project initiated by an outsider, such as a researcher. This standpoint is problematic as by default it would exclude all interventionist research strategies.

In PD, both understandings of empowerment are present [10, 39]. Empowerment has been associated mainly with amplifying the participants voices in contributing to design, and balancing the power differentials between participants [39]. PD also emphasizes the empowerment raising from the participation in the design process [10, 35] and in determining the use of it [38].

3 SHARING ECONOMY PLATFORMS

Multi-sided, collaborative or shared digital platforms create value by enabling direct interaction between different types of users [14]. The different users have different needs, and by connecting these users, the platforms facilitate value creation [14, 15]. A typical example of different users are those who offer goods or services, and those who consume them, e.g. buyers and sellers. Examples of successful multi-sided platforms that utilise this concept include Uber (transportation) [25], Task-Rabbit (small tasks) [9] and Airbnb [20].

Sharing economy, defined as "the peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services", relies on digital platforms to operate [16]. Tasks performed for money in sharing economy platforms are referred to as platform jobs done by platform workers. Digital platforms utilise network effects, striving for the highest number of registered users [32]. This means, that starting a platform is a daunting task, as the initial users receive little

value from the platform with only few other users [5]. Overcoming this "chicken-and-egg" problem is one of the most critical challenges for many multi-sided platforms to take off [14]. Although there are several strategies of how to start a multi-sided platform (heavy advertisement, artificially creating a one-sided market, strategic partnerships etc.) [40], creation of a functional platform requires substantial effort.

Many debates addressing the sharing economy and platform jobs have revolved around the question whether the platforms are merely billboards where the sellers can offer their products and services, or they are in fact employers of platform workers [29, 30, 33]. The platform providers themselves aim to minimise their own role as employer, and the workers are often forced to act as free lancing entrepreneurs who receive no protection as employees might have [28]. Recently some cities and countries have established legal restrictions to these business models, and forced the platforms to treat the workers as employees [13, 23], which has created worries that the platforms will simply move their operations to countries without regulations [17].

The discussion about sharing economy has yet largely revolved around the global north, and perspectives from the global south have been missing [1]. Platform jobs might offer new earning possibilities to some in the developing markets, and Amazon Mechanical Turk users in India have better buying power with their earnings than their counterparts in the US [29]. However, the technology, and the interaction with algorithms might cause problems for workers who are not accustomed to using smartphones [1, 29].

4 USER EMPOWERMENT IN MULTI-SIDED PLATFORMS

The rationalisation if the users, who offer goods or services on the online platforms, are empowered by the platforms depends on which definition of empowerment is being used. In this section, both definitions: empowerment as liberation from oppression, and empowerment as an ability to act more efficiently are examined.

4.1 Liberation from Oppression

Digital sharing platforms in their current operation mode are not empowering, in the sense of liberation from oppression. Digital platforms are usually administrated in a way that gives little power to the users to influence the platform's policies. The platforms are owned by groups whose priorities might be in direct conflict with the priorities of the users. Obvious example of this is the sharing of the profits between the platform and the user. A cut of the price received by the seller goes to the platform, as a way for the platform owners to create profits for themselves. Naturally, the owners interest is to take as large cut as possible, which is directly subtracted from the profits the users earn.

Additionally, the networked nature of the platforms makes it difficult to compete with. Setting up new successful platforms is notoriously difficult due to the chicken-and-egg -problem, and directly competing with existing and operating platform is even more daunting. This gives platform owners power over the users. In capitalism, the idea is that the employees can change their employer if they are unhappy with their working conditions. However, the platforms in many cases form *de facto* global monopolies in their

respective fields. The lack of competition means that the users have to accept the conditions the platforms offer them, or quit using them, which in turn could risk the users' livelihoods.

The platforms use user-rating systems, where the buyers of the services may rate the sellers, and vice versa. The ability to rate the task-givers is a way for the platforms to balance the power-difference between the buyers and sellers, which is prevalent especially when the buyers come from wealthier backgrounds than the sellers. Unfortunately, this feature needs sometimes to be provided by third-parties [19]. The algorithms of the platform direct more traffic to those who have good ratings. However, the sellers might not understand how the algorithms work, or might find the ratings given to them arbitrary [1]. The human foremen are replaced with faceless algorithms whose functioning is not throughout explained to the users, and that cannot be negotiated with. Thus users are more dis-empowered, while unable to negotiate policies and algorithmic implementations thereof.

Global platforms have been successful in treating their users as entrepreneurs rather than employees. The users have entrepreneur-like responsibilities, such as no right for minimum wage, but simultaneously they do not enjoy the full liberties of entrepreneurial position, as they are bound to the platform's policies. For example, the users need to provide their own equipment and insurances, but if they choose to turn down gigs, their ratings in the platform might suffer. In extreme cases, such as in Uber, the users offering transportation services do not even have the power to price their own work. This illustrates the new ways the platforms have power over their seller-users when compared to the traditional employer-employee model.

However, comparing platform work to employments might not be a realistic or truthful. It is clear that changing from an employed position to a platform jobs is dis-empowering. Yet the case might be, that prior to the platform jobs, no positions were available. While most Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) workers in India are earning low salaries, the presence of the platform has brought new possibilities for earning [29]. In this case, the question stands, whether working for platforms or being outside of regulated job markets is more dis-empowering. Answering this question depends on what does being outside of traditional job markets mean to the worker. If the government or other similar stakeholders provide the unemployed worker with suitable benefits, the worker might be better protected from oppression in unemployment than in platform work. Moreover, in the global south the informal sector is providing millions with livelihood opportunities which seems more controllable and liberating to the individual than subscribing to a digital platform.

4.2 Empowerment as an Ability to Act

When the platforms are considered within a context, where society does not provide safety nets for people outside of regular employments (as in most of the global south), it could be argued, that digital platforms actually empower users by providing them alternative means of earning a livelihood. While employment has been a preferred choice over entrepreneurship for many [7, 26], employments are often not widely available in relation to the high number of job seekers. It could therefore be argued, that in such conditions,

just the existence of platform jobs in itself is empowering, as they provide another avenue for earning livelihoods.

Working for a platform might offer a preferable solution when compared to other choices. Opportunistically working in different odd jobs is risky and exhausting for the individuals [41]. From the individual's point of view, the platform jobs might offer some benefits, such as documentation of contracts, a possibility build reputation and curriculum vitae etc. Working for the platforms might give the users a possibility to build some kind of regular career, which could be more difficult when working in similar jobs without the framework provided by the digital platform. Additionally, platform jobs are relatively easy to start. This might be important for communities, such as ethnic minorities, who might have difficulties to pass job interviews or otherwise have particular difficulties in finding employments.

However, this rationalisation assumes that the amount of regular employments is not affected by the increase of the platform jobs. It is possible, that the platform jobs replace the traditional job markets, which would be detrimental to individuals' empowerment in operating in these markets. There is some evidence, that AirBnB has affected the revenues of traditional hotels [42]. Likewise, Uber has also decreased the earnings of taxi drivers, although it has not effected the amount of taxi drivers [3]. This suggests, that the appearance of platform jobs might negatively affect the availability of traditional employments. If the amount of employments decreases because of the platforms, the platforms are not empowering for the workers in longer scale, even though they could bring temporary relief.

5 CASE EXAMPLE

To better illustrate the concept of worker empowerment in the sharing economy platforms, we will briefly present a case from Tanzania. We performed a contextual inquiry with hosts who were working for a platform that connected tourists to villages in global south. We did two three-night stays in two villages, interviewed and observed hosts during their hosting duties, and interviewed the local contact persons, being the broker between the platform and the hosts [21].

Although the digital platform enabled the hosts to earn money in novel ways, it also had issues. The hosts did not understand the concept of the digital platform they worked for, and asked us to send more tourists. The platform was used by local contact persons, as primary users, in contact by other means with the actual hosts. The hosts were secondary users only. One occurrence demonstrated the lack of policies, and acting power among the hosts, when a family tragedy warranted canceling of the visitors' stay yet the hosts did not know how to act. Generally, the hosts were able to earn relatively large sums of money with short hosting periods without their other income sources suffering. Additionally, tourism has different risks than the other jobs the hosts had (selling fish, agriculture, crafting). Thus, the platform job empowered the hosts to invest the surplus income into education or improvements of their own houses.

If the empowerment is understood as a liberation from oppression, it is more difficult to assess whether the platform is an empowering entity or not. The hosting income helped the hosts to liberate

themselves from *financial oppression*, but also improve their *societal stance* within their community [21]. On the other hand, the digital platform was administered entirely from the global north, though an intention of inclusion was expressed, in acts such as the rewarding of hosts. However, the platform owners maintained full control and no competition creating hosts' dependencies.

We acknowledge, that community tourism requires a global digital platform to reach visitors worldwide and provide flawless services including payments. The hosts currently do not have the infrastructure or capabilities to run similar services independently, thus have not much negotiation powers.

The relatively large amounts of hosting money received created new dependencies and societal conflicts in terms of hospitality versus self-care. As mentioned above, a family tragedy occurred which would have warranted the cancellation of the hosting. Whether it was for the income or culturally motivated, one could argue that the platform commitment has turned into a new form of oppression. A fair compensation for work has been one of the most central demands from the platform workers in the global north [17, 19], and there is little reason to believe that this should be different in the global south. Unfortunately such new income streams have left communities, that had adopted community-based tourism, in newly created dependencies and dis-empowered due to abandoning original sources of income [4, 27, 36]. Recently, the platform we used in our field work ceased its operations. The hosts might have increased their own expenses, for example by providing their children with more expensive education, while waiting for income from the platform. In this case, the hosts now need to either decrease their expenses, or find substituting incomes. This situation leaves them vulnerable for oppression. Thus, ways need to be found that ensures that users are equally empowered and involved in the design of the operation more than the design of the platforms.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Whether sharing economy platforms are empowering or not for the workers in the global south, depends primarily on the type of change they bring. If the platforms are able to provide work for the unemployed, they might actually be empowering at least for a short period of time. However, if the platform jobs instead replace the traditional employed positions, they are disempowering at a societal level.

Our fieldwork in Tanzania suggests, that the sharing economy platforms have promises for the workers in the global south. The host used the platform as supplementing income, which limited the disempowering attributes of the platform work. The hosts were not dependant on the platform owners in the direct sense. They had means to produce livelihoods for themselves and their families without the platform. However, hosting had allowed them to make important investments, such as provide better education for their children. Even though the platform owners were interested in involving the hosts' viewpoints, they still had absolute power over the platform. This power difference enables possible future malpractices, which would dis-empower the workers.

Participatory design has strong history in bettering the labour conditions. The platforms are a part of the future of labouring, and the HCI practitioners who are developing these services have great

responsibility to create fair conditions for the workers [12]. However, participatory design practitioners might need to change their way of supporting the workers. Starting a platform is a daunting task due to the network effects that need to be solved in the beginning. Thus, creating more democratic, yet functioning, platforms is not possible in the frame of a normal PD project. Instead the PD academics and practitioners need to find alternative ways of supporting the workers in the global sharing economy platforms. For example, providing the workers tools to form some sort of unions could possibly be a suitable approach for solving the labor issues in the sharing economy platforms in participatory manner. This could be done in co-operation with existing labour unions, if they are willing to extend to new types of employments [17]. PD's origin lies in dealing with existing institutions [38]. Although institutions have changed from factories to global digital services, history suggests that PD has the tools to improve workers conditions. However, as Irani and Silberman remark, providing tools for the platform workers to increase their conditions within the platform simultaneously validate the existence of the sharing economy platforms [19]. Teli et al. [37] have been promoting a *Common Perspective*, within PD, applicable to shared economy, thereby challenging financialized capitalism in light of societal transformations towards a more just and fair global society. Thus PD engages with the topic at different levels from a global abstract and structural perspective to local users' view.

Sharing economy platforms in the global south remain a relatively little researched topic. Some research from the global north can well be applied, but the particular context needs to be understood. In a society with less support for unemployed, the discussion about the role of platforms as an employer or mere billboard might not be as relevant as it is in the global north. Additionally, there is a need to understand more about the cultural gaps that the workers from the global south might experience when interacting with the users from the global north on the platforms. All in all, the global sharing economy platforms have potential to be a tool for creating more empowered workers in the global south, but there is a need to be highly alert in designing and monitoring the usage of these platforms.

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