'The plan is just survival': Data Work in Kenya and the Regime of Entrapment

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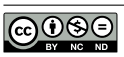
Abstract

The rapid expansion of the AI industry relies heavily on the production, verification, and maintenance of data, otherwise known as "data work". Companies outsource and offshore this work through global AI supply chains that operate under exploitative conditions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with Kenyan data workers across platforms and BPOs, this paper examines how such conditions take shape and persist. We argue that workers are caught within a *regime of entrapment,* a system of interconnected mechanisms that make it difficult for workers to leave or improve their positions. These mechanisms include the push to invest in the promise of 'AI' jobs, the use of precarious contracts to govern workers, the capture of regulatory institutions, and the exploitation of global labor arbitrage. Using complementary lenses of neoliberal governmentality, precarity, and supply chain capitalism, we analyze why labor mobilization in this sector remains uniquely constrained. We conclude by outlining an orientation for research and scholarly practice that can support workers' organizing efforts and contest the structural conditions sustaining this regime.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Employment issues**.

*This work was performed in the author's personal capacity while employed at Sony AI.



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Keywords

AI data work, data workers, outsourcing, AI supply chain, worker exploitation, critical HCI, political economy

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1 Introduction

The spectacular promises of AI rest on a contradiction. Behind the illusions of autonomy and machine intelligence are vast global networks of human workers who clean, tag, classify, and verify data and model outputs [107]. While the data work industry is rapidly growing and becoming increasingly structured and professionalized, workers' labor disappears from corporate imaginaries of progress [24, 44, 60, 147], which serves to maintain the mythology of AI as a technological achievement [13, 73, 110]. HCI and CSCW scholars have developed strands of research seeking to understand both the sensemaking process of data work [100, 101, 124], as well as the labor conditions within which this work unfolds [30, 148].

When technology companies require data-related tasks to support AI development, they often outsource this work through Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) firms [149] or platforms [5, 72] that typically operate across national borders [26]. Across both intermediaries, this work is routinely offshored to workers in Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America [116]. Recent studies and reporting on AI data work have documented low wages [97, 113], job insecurity [117], lack of healthcare benefits, and, for content moderators, the psychological toll of viewing disturbing content [1, 131].

In response to the exploitative conditions within AI data work, a newly-formed worker-led collective, the Data Labelers Association (DLA) [41] in Kenya has been engaged in organizing efforts for fair wages, transparent contracts, access to healthcare, and other statutory benefits for both platform and BPO data workers. In this paper, we draw on semi-structured interviews with 18 data workers affiliated with the DLA to report on testimonies of their labor conditions. The interviews were set up as a workers' inquiry [98] and were motivated by one key research question: How do labor practices within the global AI supply chain shape the working conditions and experiences of Kenyan data workers?

Across interviews, workers articulated a pervasive sense of dependence and immobility in their jobs. These experiences were not incidental nor isolated, but patterned. We conceptualize this dynamic as a *regime of entrapment*, a governing logic of AI supply chain capitalism in which workers are bound to their roles through cycles of debt, normalized precarity, and illusions of mobility. This regime operates as a web of control that scales from individual contracts to state policy to global wage arbitrage. It reproduces colonial hierarchies, obscures workers' value behind AI's mythology of autonomy, and relies on mechanisms that continually draw workers in while keeping them in low-paid, unstable positions. The regime of entrapment is a *networked apparatus*, taking advantage of precarious contracts and regulatory institutions to routinize underemployment. Finally, the regime of entrapment operates across *multiple scales*; it produces persistent anxiety about job loss and unfulfilled promises of career mobility among workers, and allows companies to reduce labor costs by exploiting the 'flexibilization' of employment within a vast global workforce.

To understand how the regime of entrapment takes shape—and why it proves so difficult to contest—we turn to three complementary analytic frames: neoliberal governmentality, precarity, and supply chain capitalism. Neoliberal governmentality helps explain how the industry cultivates an entrepreneurial subject who internalizes responsibility, competition, and risk, rendering precarious conditions normal and inevitable. Precarity, however, must not be understood simply a diffuse social condition. The organization of contemporary AI data work is entangled with longer histories of colonial extraction and racialized dispossession that shape where value is produced and whose labor is rendered interchangeable. Recognizing these dynamics within supply chain capitalism further reveals how the industry's global structure facilitates what Tsing describes as "*super*-exploitation" [136], meaning efforts to organize labor must confront not only local conditions but also transnational forces.

This analysis frames the contributions we bring to the CHI community. First, through the voices of Kenyan data workers, this paper articulates how these global dynamics are lived and felt in daily labor practices. Second, we theorize the *regime of entrapment*, identifying six mechanisms that bind workers within the AI supply chain. Third, building on scholarship on precarity and neoliberal governmentality in platform-mediated labor, alongside the lens of supply chain capitalism, we explain why labor mobilization in this industry remains uniquely constrained. Finally, drawing on prefigurative politics, we gesture toward ways researchers might orient their work toward unsettling the extractive operations that sustain this regime.

2 Background

To fully understand what makes Kenya one of the central sites of data production within the globally distributed AI supply chain, it is helpful to attend to the factors that draw workers to digitally-mediated roles. While the country has a growing skilled and educated workforce, youth employment remains a persistent challenge [141], especially among fresh college graduates due to the mismatch between graduates and job opportunities [33]. The Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) reports that roughly 67% of Kenyan youth (15-34 years old) are unemployed or underemployed [49].

To generate more employment opportunities, state-led development strategies have aimed at attracting foreign investment. By the early 2000s, expanding communication capacities created new opportunities for transnational service work and Kenyan policymakers sought to capture a share of this economy [90]. Initiatives such as the *Strategic Plan 2023–2027* and *Kenya Vision 2030* have identified the BPO sector as a key pillar of economic growth [78] and prioritized the creation of infrastructure and policy frameworks to attract multinational firms [89, 104, 105, 135], eventually fostering an investor-centric culture [125]. Consequently, outsourcing firms have expanded in Kenya across customer care centers, content moderation, data annotation, and other IT services, positioning themselves as "a revolution in labor markets"[132]. and "on-ramps to formalization" of labor in the Global South [132].

Much of data work was historically carried out through global platforms (*e.g.,* Amazon Mechanical Turk, UpWork), which operate as a marketplace where data requesters post tasks, and workers are paid on a per-task basis. With the expanding demands for AI data, BPO companies also began offering specialized annotation services. Specifically in the data work industry, BPOs, such as Sama, Teleperformance, Accenture, and Wipro, set up large-scale operations in Nairobi and other urban Kenyan regions [3, 70, 108, 143]. By some estimates, Kenya has close to two million digital workers [135], many of whom perform data annotation for AI systems like ChatGPT [114] and moderate content for social media companies, like Meta [17] and TikTok [115]. Companies such as Sama and CloudFactory typically adopt the "impact sourcing" model to cultivate moral economies of "ethical AI" that appeal to clients while imposing precarious labor conditions onto workers [24, 106]. In response, the Data Labelers Association [41] and the African Content Moderators Union [112] are two prominent associations to have recently emerged to address exploitative practices.

3 Related Work

Below, we situate our study within a growing body of scholarship that calls for tracing the supply chains underlying contemporary AI development (section 3.1). Next, we turn toward the techniques through which platform workers are governed within these labor arrangements, showing how legal employment classification and algorithmic management coalesce into modes of control that we can interpret through the lens of neoliberal governmentality (section 3.2). We also build on and contribute to the scholarship on precarity in platform-mediated labor to illustrate how these governing tactics create pervasive, though uneven, forms of precarity within platform work sectors (section 3.3).

3.1 Labor in the AI Supply Chain

While critical AI studies scholarship has devoted extensive attention to the harms that surface at the point of deployment [16, 40, 126], an emerging line of research has begun to interrogate the infrastructures [19, 87], labor [46, 55, 129], and organizational processes that make AI systems possible [88, 120]. By shifting attention from sites of deployment to sites of production, this scholarship highlights how the same logics of inequality are already woven into the conditions under which AI is built [123]. This shift has opened space for examining labor as central to understanding the broader impacts of AI [53, 121].

Contributing to this broadened understanding, recent scholarship has sought to examine AI through the lens of supply chains and value chains [152]. While every AI supply chain has a different configuration (*e.g.,* depending on sector, use case, whether it is developed in-house or procured) [20], scholars have shown how the computing supply chain commonly relies on planetary-scale material extraction, logistical infrastructures, and labor arrangements that stretch across continents [32, 35]. Valdivia described how the supply chain brings together a "mine worker in Brazil extracting tungsten with a data center engineer working in México, with a data labeler in Kenya, and an AI engineer working in the UK" [144], forming a global production network that connects diverse labor skills.

Outsourcing is central to these supply chain configurations, reflecting companies' choices about whether particular activities should be performed inside or outside their organizational boundaries [38]. Multinational companies develop complex AI value chains that keep work that is ostensibly knowledge-intensive highly concentrated and local, and outsource the labor- and resource-intensive aspects globally [27]. Outsourcing arrangements enable tech companies to reduce costs by exploiting legal and political-economic conditions elsewhere [116, 140], often under the banner of "impact sourcing" or digital development [106].

Anna Tsing's scholarship on supply chain capitalism offers a productive lens to understand the structural role of difference in sustaining these global production networks [136]. Tsing argues that supply chains consolidate value by connecting heterogeneous sites into coordinated systems, thus creating and sustaining class niches. Within AI, these niches can be highly stratified: engineers, designers, and platform developers occupy central nodes with high visibility and control over production [22], while data labeling, cleaning, and verification labor is dispersed across multiple countries [69]. Differences across contexts, between labor, knowledge, and resource control, function as sources of extraction. Dreams of entrepreneurship shape worker subjectivities and the meaning of work.

The simultaneous production of difference and cultivation of entrepreneurial subjectivities are thus central mechanisms through which global supply chains generate value and maintain their functioning—how, in effect, they create conditions for what Tsing refers to as *supply chain capitalism*. Our work builds on this scholarship by drawing on the lens of supply chain capitalism to analyze how the configurations of contemporary AI supply chains shape the experiences of data workers in Kenya.

3.2 Techniques of governing platform workers

The philosopher Michel Foucault conceived neoliberalism as a specific mode of governance that extends and internalizes market-based values far beyond the economy to one that fundamentally transforms social institutions and cultures. The idea of neoliberal 'governmentality' (*i.e.,* the techniques and rationalities of government) can be traced to Foucault's notion of "biopower" [52], which is not inherently repressive yet governs individuals by managing "their environment, the milieu in which they live" [51]. Such a diffuse form of power operates by cultivating an entrepreneurial subjectivity [91], making the individual an "entrepreneur of himself [sic]" and internalizing competition, personal responsibility, and, crucially, a precarious life [52]. Forms of neoliberal governmentality encourage workers to understand themselves as self-managing enterprises. In the sphere of labor, the techniques of biopower allow the enterprising capacities of laboring subjects to freely unfold, but they are simultaneously directed by fixing the parameters that define the rules of the game [146] or, as Foucault phrased it, the conditions of possibility. There is thus an ambivalence between "empowerment and subjugation" [85] experienced by the entrepreneurial subject. The prevalence of this social imaginary has helped reinforce the political power of neoliberalism as an ideology and a policy paradigm.

Scholars have shown that platform-mediated labor operates as a distinct mode of neoliberal governmentality [77, 162]. This dynamic becomes especially visible in what many describe as the *"uberization"* of work [2, 37, 66], where employment is reorganized around individualized arrangements that cast workers as micro-entrepreneurs [50]. Companies transfer many of the financial and material costs and risks onto workers themselves, such as purchasing and maintaining vehicles for ride-hailing work [21] or purchasing beauty products and equipment from the platform for home-service work [6].

Platform companies market themselves as mere "mediators of supply and demand" [2]. Workers are thus reframed as "users" of platforms instead of being recognized as employees subject to capital-labor relationship [57]. Kaye-Essien [77] notes how Uber's "be your own boss" marketing rhetoric seeks to offer its operators the utopia of freedom and economic opportunity. This promise of autonomy, however, often obscures the conditional nature of such empowerment [6]. Zwick [162] and Duggan et al. [42] demonstrate how misclassifying platform workers as independent contractors or self-employed is central to allowing companies to bypass local labor regulation and avoid employment responsibilities. In doing so, the platform maintains a "reserve army of labor" [71] that can be called into the workforce when needed.

The techniques of governing workers are often indirect through the use of algorithms. Critical platform studies scholarship has established how platforms' algorithmic infrastructures exert control over workers' labor practices and structure their working conditions [122]. Chandhiramowuli et al. [28] highlight pervasive forms of algorithmic governance over data workers, where various forms of quantification are used to set benchmarking targets for workers to meet within specific timelines. Similarly, Krzywdzinski and Gerber [79] show how platforms use gamified interfaces, rankings, and automated metrics to accelerate 'productivity' and keep workers

engaged. Building on this body of scholarship on the techniques of governing platform workers, we extend insights into some of these practices to explore how they create experiences of entrapment for data workers in Kenya.

3.3 Experiences of precarity in platform-mediated labor

At the core of governing the entrepreneurial subject lies a unique duality of freedom amidst precarity. If we understand precarity as "conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one's control" [23], then the neoliberal mode of governing functions by conditioning people to "experience their situation, their life, their present, and their future as containing danger" [52]. This new social class, the *'precariat'* (*i.e.,* combining precarious and proletariat), is marked by insecurity, lack of a stable occupational identity, and thus a lack of a collective voice [130]. Precarity, then, perpetuates a "mobilizing" of uncertainty [80]. It takes on a *governmental* role both in its "repressive, striating forms", but also in its "ambivalently productive moments" that emerge with self-government and the (im)possibility of refusals [86].

Extensive scholarship has documented how platform labor creates precarity in workers' lives. Studies on platform-based microwork show that workers perform tasks in isolation without collective identity or bargaining power, leading to their alienation [14, 68]. Platform workers frequently report irregular pay, volatile income streams [62], and are threatened with non-payment if the work is deemed unsatisfactory. Anwar and Graham [9] show how gig work brings freedom, flexibility, precarity, and vulnerability into workers across five African countries. Platform workers often noted that the flexibility promised by platform work is significantly undermined by constant surveillance, increased work intensity, and unsocial working hours. Anwar and Graham [8] also highlight practices of reworking, resilience, and resistance, such as negotiating pay, purchasing client feedback, or withholding completed work if the client withholds payment.

For scholars of labor in the 'Global North', the 'precariat' social class in the platform economy has been tied to the loss of stable, unionized jobs that allowed people to attain upward social and occupational mobility [61]. Breman [18]'s critique in 'A Bogus Concept' reminds us that a majority of the world has long worked within constraints of informality and precarity. Extending this perspective, Anwar et al. [10] draw on on uneven geographic development to show how all economic activities, including those that appear placeless (such as data annotation) remain anchored in and patterned by spatial and historical difference. Attending to Posada's [116] scholarship on coloniality in data work is especially instructive. He traces how "historical power imbalances derived from colonialism that persist today" continue to structure the outsourcing of data work where companies "target specific populations [...] in particular geographies [...] to profit from a workforce that is primarily dependent on them". It is this space constituted through precarity and ambivalence, and governed by the particular neoliberal conditions of data work, that has grounded the analysis that follows.

4 Method

Procedures. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 data workers from Kenya between July-August 2025. In line with Miceli et al. [99], we aimed to center workers' epistemic authority and their active role in co-producing knowledge about their work experiences. Our research was designed with an exploratory interview guide that encouraged participants to discuss the issues they perceived as most urgent to address. Instead of moving frequently along predefined questions, the interviewer let participants direct the conversation, which led to the emergence of new topics and themes. All interviews ended up being anchored less in task-specific concerns and more in structural issues, such as exploitation through labor conditions.

The interviews often included participants' personal histories in data work, descriptions of a typical 'day-in-their-life' for doing data work, observations on the temporal development of data work industry and the changes in work practices, management structures, and overall work conditions. We also asked about protections or rights they wished existed, and their thoughts on the future of data work and the implications of automation. Because many participants had experience with both BPO and platform-based arrangements, we invited them to compare these contexts.

Participants were interviewed in English individually on Zoom. Due to resource and travel constraints within the research team, the interviews were scheduled remotely based on participants' convenience. While in-person interviews would have been ideal, our interviewees perform most of their work online and participate in online meetings for training and coordination, and were thus comfortable with the research engagements occurring remotely. The conversations lasted approximately one hour and the interviewees were compensated with 50 Euros via a bank transfer.

We received approval from a U.S.-based IRB for conducting interviews online in Kenya. As a part of this process, our university IRB required a cultural evaluation letter from a regional expert who reviewed our research plan and materials—including the recruitment materials, consent procedure, and interview guide—to ensure our study aligned with local customs and cultural norms. We obtained written informed consent electronically as well as verbal consent at the start of the interview. We took video recordings with participants' permission, which were transcribed verbatim subsequently for analysis.

Participants. We recruited participants through the Data Labelers Association (DLA) [41], a local worker collective with which a member of our team maintains an ongoing collaboration. We approached the organization to request their support in circulating a recruitment call to their members. For this study, we define 'data workers' as individuals who perform labor to create, organize, or refine datasets for AI development. We solicited data workers who had previously worked for a BPO or platform. Notably, 11 participants had experience working across both BPOs and platform-based arrangements, 5 participants had only worked for platforms, and 2 participants had only worked for BPOs.

All participants were located in urban Kenyan contexts, such as Nairobi, Juja, and Machakos. To protect anonymity and minimize the risk of identification, we use pseudonyms when referring to participants and present participant demographics in aggregate (in Table 1). We chose, however, not to anonymize the names of the

Information	Count
Work Arrangement	Platform Only **(5)**, BPO Only **(2)**, Platform and BPO both **(11)**
Data Modalities	Image **(18)**, Video **(18)**, Text **(17)**, Audio **(15)**, LIDAR **(7)**
Platforms	Samasource **(6)**, Cloudfactory **(9)**, Remotasks **(16)**, Appen **(6)**, Avala AI **(5)**, Telus **(4)**, Oneforma **(3)**, Toloka **(2)**, Clickworker **(3)**, Rev **(2)**, Upwork **(1)**, Transperfect **(1)**, Verbit **(1)**, among others
Years of Experience	4-5 years **(7)**, 6-8 years **(8)**, 9+ years **(3)**
Gender	Women **(9)**, Men **(9)**
Age	25-30 years **(3)**, 30-35 years **(10)**, 35-40 years **(5)**

Table 1: Summary of interview participants' work arrangements, experience in data types, and demographics.

platforms and BPOs in the spirit of making known precisely the sites where workers experienced exploitation. Moving forward, we use 'intermediaries' to refer to both BPO and platform companies, and we name platforms or BPOs explicitly when findings apply specifically to them.

Data Analysis. We analyzed our data thematically, guided by Charmaz's approach to constructivist grounded theory [29]. Three members of the research team reviewed the notes and transcripts from each interview and conducted initial line-by-line coding. In parallel, the larger research team collaboratively read and discussed interview transcripts in weekly meetings to engage and become familiar with workers' accounts. We then conducted focused coding to attend to workers' working conditions, and to move from workers' lived experience to the structural conditions and infrastructures that produced these conditions. We developed reflexive memos during the analysis and discussed them among the research team. We iteratively revisited the data and refined our interpretations through meeting, diverging, and synthesizing. Later rounds of analysis revealed six mechanisms that trap workers within their roles in the AI supply chain, which we conceptualize as a *regime of entrapment* that consolidates a set of infrastructural and political-economic mechanisms. During the later stages of analysis, we reached theoretical saturation within our memos, the point at which no new insights emerged from additional data, and thus the interviews were concluded [4, 56].

To ensure that our interpretations of participants' experiences reflected their perspectives, we incorporated member checking into our research process. We shared a summary of key findings alongside our full draft, and invited feedback on whether our descriptions aligned with their perspectives and especially if there were any disagreements. In reporting our findings, we move between broader analysis across participants and thick description of individual workers' experiences for illustrative purposes.

Positionality Statement. Our author team brings together researchers trained in HCI, design, sociology, political economy, and science and technology studies—all of whom focus on critically oriented, labor-centered research. Our prior work has turned attention to the global distributions of labor, and spans a range of geographic and work contexts including studies of data annotation, content moderation, and software development, and involving in-person and remote field studies in Kenya, Ethiopia, Venezuela, Portugal, Bolivia, India, the Philippines, the US, and China. These experiences shape the questions we ask, the power dynamics we attend to, and the analytic sensibilities we bring—particularly a focus on how technological systems reconfigure global labor inequities.

We conduct this research from positions in well-resourced institutions in the UK, Germany, Spain, and the US. These locations afford us institutional legitimacy and visibility within academic and policy spaces, but they also risk what Leal calls 'community fetishism' [82]: centering marginalized workers as the site of inquiry while leaving the broader political economy of knowledge production unexamined. Our positionality as researchers who are largely external to Kenyan data work communities shaped what participants chose to share and how we interpreted their accounts. Many workers—especially those actively engaged in collective organizing—expressed a desire for their experiences to reach international audiences. Several emphasized sharp contrasts between working conditions and labor protections in Europe and the US with those available to them in Kenya. Their willingness to articulate these dynamics was sometimes motivated by the perceived credibility associated with our institutional affiliations. The tensions associated with our location as researchers cannot be resolved by disclosure in a positionality statement, but has, throughout our collaboration, invited reflexive attention within the research team.

Grounded by a Foucauldian understanding of power as enacted rather than possessed, we approach research encounters as moments where the shared production of knowing and being must be continually situated [63] and negotiated [93]. This stance informed our methodological choices. We conducted semi-structured interviews to understand workers' daily practices, concerns, and aspirations. During data collection, we sought to treat interviewees not as merely subjects of our research but as "active agents and knowledge producers" [67], creating space for them to articulate priorities in their own terms. We also sought to incorporate their feedback into the framing of our findings by engaging in member-checking, to ensure that we did not misconstrue the heterogeneity of workers' experiences. For each member of the research team, this work represents part of longer-term engagements with workers where our commitments are to sustained and durable conversations that make possible new relations.

Across these multiple and knotted threads of research, we cannot fully grasp the consequences of our complicities in studying labor

shaped by global inequities, nor can reflexive acknowledgment erase our entanglement in the political economy of knowledge production. However, we work to remain accountable to these tensions, foster coalitional trust across difference, and avoid extractive research practices. This commitment is ongoing and imperfect, but it grounds the interpretive stance from which this paper is written.

5 Findings

Workers explained their entry into data work with a language of hope, with dreams of economic mobility and professional growth. Recruiters promised them the "jobs of the future", tied to the prestige of artificial intelligence and the wider tech economy, and assured them they would earn "good money" (Lilian). At the same time, for most, their entry into this role was out of necessity to meet urgent needs: to cover university fees, support family members, or achieve financial independence from their families. Eight interviewees started data work directly after finishing high school or during undergraduate study, when they were struggling to find jobs in their fields of training. Some workers entered with aspirations to eventually break into the professions they trained for or launch their own businesses. When starting, none of them knew how long they would be involved in data work.

Recruitment into data work relied on its proximity to AI. Workers were invited in by the rhetoric of AI hype, but also through the placement of training/work opportunities within economically vulnerable communities. As Martin put it, intermediaries deliberately "come to slums where they know people are struggling. [...] Somebody is very desperate for money. You know what he'll do? He will jump in." Joy similarly highlighted how the training center for Sama was "strategically" located in a low-income area. Martin and Joy gestured toward how the so-called impact sourcing model taps into communities' existing vulnerabilities. Intermediaries constructed an image of opportunity that mobilized workers' aspirations to create a steady labor supply.

Lilian was fascinated by her job when she entered this industry, and she still spoke with a kind of wonder towards her work. She felt pride in training the AI tools that are now ubiquitous: "ChatGPT, there is no human face behind the AI. You tell everybody you're working on this AI tool, and they say, 'Oh my God, how do you do that?' They are so fascinated." Workers, then, were lured by the proximity to technologies that were widely celebrated and publicly recognized. This sense of nearness to the technology frontier served as a recruitment hook. The narratives, the hope, and speculation associated with AI progress impacted workers' decisions to enter the industry, even as the reality of the work soon revealed itself to be challenging.

The workers we interviewed spoke repeatedly of feeling stuck in their jobs. They invoked metaphors of trickery, traps, and webs of control. In multiple readings and the analysis of our interviews, we identified six mechanisms that appeared to keep workers locked in their roles within the AI supply chain. Taken together, we conceptualize these mechanisms constituting a *regime of entrapment*. Instead of realizing the promise of an AI job, our research participants spoke of being captured in cycles of job insecurity and under-employment that foreclosed alternative paths. They occupied roles where their social and economic mobility was structurally constrained through precarious contracts, threats of replacement, institutional and jurisdictional separation, and a lack of social recognition of their contributions that would allow them to retain/use their expertise in other sectors. In the following subsections, we give shape to this regime of entrapment by detailing those mechanisms that bind workers to AI's supply chain and to data work.

5.1 Inviting investment into the promise of AI jobs

Across workers' accounts, we see the substantial and varied forms of upfront investment required to secure a job. For platforms, workers had to purchase expensive equipment that met detailed specifications. Matthew described how, "You have to have a perfect machine. So you have to invest a lot of time just getting a setup. And this goes for over 100,000 Kenyan Shillings. You must get a good machine with at least 16 GB RAM. You must have internet access, and [the platform] will give you specifications. You are supposed to get 15 Mbps, nothing less." Emmet's internet recurring cost was $40, approximately his two-week earnings from a platform. From the outset, getting an opportunity was contingent on whether workers could assemble material resources to adhere to these hyper-specifications. There was no assurance that eventual remuneration would reflect the investment, and workers had to remain engaged to offset the upfront costs.

While BPOs often provided work equipment, office space, and an internet connection, they demanded investment through workers' time. For Sama, two interviewees were first sent to a training center where they would be trained in digital literacy skills. Workers had to fund their training, thus making them investors in their labor capacity. Some workers were trained in these centers for weeks or months. Joy, for example, was able to get through training in two weeks, and her colleagues were surprised that she transitioned rather quickly. On the other hand, Lilian struggled to transition from the training center to the production floor:

> They promise a lot of money, so you come in with all these hopes. Then you start getting trained, and they blame it on you. Everything. You're learning too slowly. You have bad accuracy. You have this, you have that. Ultimately, you'll find yourself training for almost four months, and you're not paid anything, because they keep blaming [you]. You're just practicing to get there. But honestly, sincerely, you have to pay bills every month, and now it has extended all the way to five months.

Workers had to put in months of effort under the promise of future wages. The training period was uncompensated. Matthew contrasted this with other contexts, saying US-based workers were paid $30 for training tasks and $50 for live tasks. He explained, "Here in Africa, your training is free." Workers said they were frequently assigned to label actual data ('live tasks') drawn from client projects that were presented as recruitment assessments or training. Bahati described a similar recruitment experience with Aya Data. He was given 25 segmentation tasks where he had to label each pixel in an image as an assessment test that took him a few days to complete. He noted, "it seemed like a scam [...] they are just live tasks. It is like working with them for 50 hours if you do 25 tasks.

It was people trying to use your effort to get the work done without pay." Workers reported that many intermediaries deliberately trained more people than they intended to 'hire'. Only a fraction of trainees–those deemed high-performing–secured paid positions. Given the unpaid labor, training and onboarding were thus another mechanism for pure capital accumulation for BPOs.

The initial investment, which include equipment and Internet fees for platform workers and unpaid training for BPO workers, acts as a mechanism of entrapment. By requiring workers to commit money, time, and effort upfront, the system locks them into participation. Workers who have made these investments are incentivized to continue engaging, even when wages are low or work is unstable. Once they enter, the structure of training in data work functions as a site for labor extraction, through which intermediaries consolidated value from workers long before they start getting compensated.

5.2 Normalizing conditions of under-employment

Under-employment (distinct from *un*-employment) is a condition where workers are employed below their potential in terms of hours, skills/qualifications, and wages (cf. [94]). Across all interviews, workers recounted visceral forms of acute wage under-employment. Participants spoke of barely managing rent and groceries month-to-month. Lilian once earned two dollars for a week of work for a platform: "It was around 250 Kenyan shillings. A packet of two kg maize flour, it was around 200. So will you eat only the maize flour, and nothing else? How are you going to pay for your rent? How are you going to pay for the same WiFi that you are using?" Such insufficient wages trapped workers in cycles of debt. Joseph noted how his salary was only able to cover his rent and "after two weeks, I am back into being broke". Joseph would then borrow from friends, family, or mobile loan apps to cover essentials, then used his next pay to repay the debt, only to have to borrow again. "So it was just working, paying, working, and paying your debts. Basically, you are working, but you are still in debt." Indebtedness appeared as a routine feature in workers' lives.

Under-employment converted workers' time and energy into below-subsistence wages and kept them tethered to the job. Income was not only categorically low, but for most data workers, it stagnated or declined over time. Joseph, who has been "in and out of BPO jobs", is paid approximately the same hourly wage as when he started eight years ago. He explained, "What I realized with BPOs in Kenya, especially CloudFactory, is that they never raise the salary. Let's say I've worked from 2017 to 2020, but another person joins in 2020, maybe fresh from campus. We are paid the same salary." This kind of wage stagnation and reduction must be understood in relation to inflation and workers' life courses. Joseph, William, and Christine, who began these jobs as high school graduates, now support families. They married, had children, and took on new caregiving responsibilities. Janet noted how the cost of living has steadily increased in Kenya, even as the wages stagnated. These ongoing financial pressures were intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. When intermediaries mandated working from home, they reduced the hourly rate from $1.45 to $1.25, arguing that workers would no longer need a 'transportation allowance'. For James, working from home created new expenses. He had to pay for reliable internet, purchase or maintain equipment, and set up a home workstation. For many interviewees, the pay never returned to pre-COVID levels, even as they were later expected to return to office.

In a similar vein, platform workers experience a steady decrease in pay rates. When Emmanuel started working with Remotasks, he reported earning over 350$ for a month. Then, intermediaries used network hiring to saturate the job market. Workers started noticing that as more and more workers joined the platform, the pay per task decreased. James explained how tech companies are taking advantage of the limited labor protections, "Before, the pay was up to $10 for one hour. But now the projects have become so complex, yet the pay has drastically decreased. I reached a point where even for Remotasks, you could work 20 hours a day for the whole week, and not even get paid." Incomes declined even with growing task complexity and workload.

While the earnings for BPO workers seem to have stagnated or declined, platform workers' wages have decreased considerably over time. However, it is important to note that pay in BPOs is not necessarily preferred over that on platforms. The pay rate in BPOs was so low that Janet, who worked simultaneously in CloudFactory during the designated working hours and on the Remotask outside of those hours, found herself earning more from Remotask. As a result, she decided to quit her BPO job and focus solely on the platform. Similarly, Fiona left Sama after working on Remotasks and realized that "Remotask was offering are the same jobs I'm doing at Sama Source, and the money I could make in a day from Remotasks is the money I'm being paid to go there [Sama] every day of the month, except probably Sundays."

Workers' accounts point toward a race-to-the-bottom strategy. The data work industry had a "golden period" where attractive wages pulled workers into the system and built the intermediaries' reputation as a viable source of income. However, once the intermediaries accumulated a sufficiently large supply of workers, it became possible to devalue their labor. Gloria gestured toward an intentionality in noting how intermediaries try to "get a lot of people to do these things at a cheaper price." Instead of a smaller group of workers having enough money and enough work, intermediaries actively expanded recruiting and inflated staffing. Workers entered with hope for sustained income. Once invested in the work (through time, training, and equipment), they depended on a system that steadily eroded their pay.

5.3 Governing through precarious contracts, or lack thereof

Outsourcing within the AI supply chain allowed lead firms to distance themselves from the everyday exploitative conditions of data work. Workers in BPOs typically have short-term contracts and are kept in waiting queues. They are bound by strict non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and face threats of dismissal and replacement. In comparison, workers on platforms often have no formal contract and are expected to be flexible and readily available to accommodate clients' schedules.

The contract arrangements that mediate data work allowed for government through precarization. For example, CloudFactory renewed workers' contracts every month. Judith once experienced a three-month gap between two projects when she was not paid and was told that the company would reach out to her when tasks were available. She did not understand "why we were signing the contract [every month] and not getting paid. [...] We kept going because we didn't have anywhere to go, so we will have to wait for an update from them." Dinah and Wanjiru believed that contracts, even short-term ones, promised a measure of security.

Being "put on the bench" or held in a "waiting queue" emerged as a common practice that allowed intermediaries to maintain a surplus of ostensibly disposable labor supply that could be onboarded or abandoned at will. Martin got involved in data work after graduating with a high school diploma. His initial projects at Sama were related to self-driving technology. Around 2018, when they signed a contract with Meta, workers were told that Sama would be "picking bright students to be taken to [Meta's project]". Martin's proficiency with Swahili, Luganda, and English meant that he was picked as one of the data annotators who would move to Meta's content moderation project:

> They start giving you good jobs, so after maybe six months, you'll start being introduced to sexual content, really inappropriate videos. You have already signed a contract. You have signed an NDA, meaning you must finish a one-year contract. [...] You cannot start complaining about the job.

Martin's local knowledge and language skills were commodified as a resource for value extraction. He was recruited under one job description but was soon redirected into content moderation projects. This work was worsening Martin's mental health and well-being. The non-disclosure agreement within his contract and constant exposure to distressing content left him isolated, unable to share the nature of the work with his family, and eventually, he started seeking therapy at his own expense. Martin requested a return to the data labeling projects he had initially signed up for. Shortly after, when his contract came up for renewal, he was placed "on the bench." Although his contract was not formally terminated, Martin was not paid for nine months at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Martin was told that there were no projects available for him. During these challenging months, Martin relied on friends for meals and companionship: "I would go to a friend's place. I sit there. I make stories. He cooks. After he cooks, I eat. So I was doing that with many friends. I was surviving because I didn't have any money, didn't have any income." The financial and emotional toll had a lasting impact on Martin. "When I remember that time, it still pains in my heart, because up to now, I never recovered, like financially, very honest with you, because I went through many debts."

These 'waiting' arrangements created a pernicious form of job insecurity. Workers were told to remain available for tasks at any time, yet were left unpaid in the interim. Gloria described how she was never assigned work for months after completing training with Avala AI. She explained, "They try to manage you so that they pick you when they have a lot of work. The problem is that they don't communicate this. If you tell me upfront, I will plan [for] myself and maybe get something else to do on the side. But you are telling me every day, I'm gonna give you work, I'm gonna give you work." Gloria received email reminders to log in and check for available tasks, only to find no work. Apart from the uncertainty of accessing work, there is also continued frustration and a labor of waiting. Platforms maintained a surplus supply of workers and were not transparent about the availability of upcoming work, leaving workers in prolonged periods of suspension and destabilizing their lives.

Workers also experienced a constant threat of dismissal and replacement. Interviewees were continually reminded that their contracts could be terminated at any moment and for any reason, including reporting a few minutes late, forgetting to clock in, asking for caregiving leave, or working from home when they could not afford transportation. Workers pointed out how overt challenges to managerial authority, such as complaining about supervisors or raising concerns about low wages/exploitative conditions, were likely to cost them their jobs. Andrew remarked, "I can be fired any time of the day, even when I'm working. It's around 3:41 [pm] in Kenya. I can get fired instantly. And they will employ another person and pay them the same peanuts they are paying me for the job." Workers articulated a persistent worry of losing their jobs and income. Joseph noted that even when he has a job, he feels like he does not have one. He explained that to navigate the insecurity and under-employment, "many of the Kenyans working in BPOs are the ones looking for jobs, constantly, every day, that's their job. And then others normally do two jobs. So security is normally having two jobs. [...]" Job seeking, then, became a full-time endeavour in and of itself.

In comparison to BPO work, platform work presented a more unstructured work schedule. Each morning, workers began by checking their pipeline for tasks, repeatedly refreshing if none appeared. For Dinah, the work sometimes reached into the middle of the night. She remembered being woken at 2 a.m. by a call from a co-worker. New tasks were posted. "Forget about sleep," Dinah said. "No matter where you are, get your machine, sit down, and buy bundles. Even if there's no electricity. And you start working. You can work for three tasks, so at least you have one dollar." This instability demanded invisible coordination work to sustain income. Wanjiru explained how he would sometimes spend more time searching for work than completing paid tasks. Faith described this as a kind of seasonal work "that is not as steady as you'd imagine," and Gloria, who also noticed how jobs are scarce during the European and US summer. Interviewees' day-to-day was consumed by work and tied to the schedules and priorities of lead firms in the US and Europe, and the rhythms of these imperial centers structured workers' lives.

5.4 Capturing regulatory institutions

Workers experienced exploitation most directly through intermediary practices, yet they were equally attentive to the state's role in sustaining these conditions. Regulatory capture could be understood as a process through which regulatory targets "manipulate the state agencies that are supposed to control them" (cf. [36]). Under pressure to attract global capital, state institutions embraced BPOs as vehicles of development. Regulatory capture manifests itself in platforms' practices that exploit tax arbitrage and in BPOs'

practices that misclassify workers and deny them labor protections, while forming an alliance between intermediaries and the government. However, workers noted that the promise of "job creation" obscured how these new jobs *exist*, but they are unstable and deeply underpaid. Gloria reflected on how their "government is so aligned with the countries where this work originated. Most of them come from the US, [...] from Europe, even Asia." Instead of mediating the geopolitical relationship to secure labor protections, Gloria argued that state institutions appeared to allow companies to dictate labor conditions. The developmental narrative was mobilized to justify precarious work arrangements. Many participants voiced a desire to disrupt this narrative through their organizing and for state institutions to create stronger labor standards.

AI supply chain relies on worker misclassification and tax arbitrage to its benefit. BPO data workers were classified as independent contractors, but their work conditions diverge from the practical norms of such status. Workers reported that they are expected to adhere to rigid schedules. They have to report to work five days a week, eight hours per day, leaving them little of the autonomy/flexibility characteristic of an independent contractor. At the same time, BPO workers lacked the protections and benefits afforded to employees. Companies could also respond to fiscal-regulatory interventions through supply chain mobility. Two interviewees speculated that Remotask's abrupt exit from Kenya was due to proposed regulation that would require platforms to pay taxes. Andrew explained, "the politics made Remotask run away from Kenya." Tax obligations were a site of negotiation between platforms and the state, and workers' livelihoods were contingent on the outcomes of these negotiations. From workers' perspectives, capture was a configuration of governance in which state actions reinforced corporate imperatives, intentionally or unintentionally.

Over time, workers who have experiences in both BPOs and platforms noticed platforms mirroring BPO labor practices to take advantage of limited protections. One of the platforms operating in Kenya, Avala AI, did not offer workers a contract position. At the same time, workers were expected to put in a minimum number of work hours every week and be present on-site. Each day, Dinah entered an office equipped with typical tech industry amenities, a microwave, refrigerator, standing desks, and high-speed internet. She would use company-owned MacBook laptops. Despite the Silicon Valley workplace aesthetic, labor conditions remained precarious and exploitative. Dinah repeatedly asked the Avala staff what she would be paid for the month, and she did not receive a straight answer. Over the course of a whole month, she put in 8 hours a day, working full-time. She was paid 25$ as her total earnings that month. There was no upfront transparency or agreed-upon rate for workers' payment.

Interviewees repeatedly expressed unease with the entanglements between state actors and the tech industry. They described how public-private partnerships limited possibilities for accountability. For workers, this proximity felt like a form of regulatory capture. Martin described his frustration with Sama's close ties to the Kenyan government. He recalled how "the other day, the President [of Kenya] came to the office". For him and others, such visible alliances fostered the sense that companies enjoy a degree of protection that workers do not. In Martin's words, if workers attempted to sue, "your case will never go through, because the President is protecting them." Whether this alliance impacted judicial decisions, workers emphasized that it generated a culture of silencing, that their grievances would not be heard. Workers could face retaliation and jeopardize their already precarious employment. Workers thus felt trapped because the institutions meant to safeguard their rights were instead expanding their dependency on unstable and underpaid work.

5.5 Exploiting global labor arbitrage

Across the AI value chain, we see how the possibility of distributed digital work allowed companies to engage in global labor arbitrage, which refer to the strategic practice of companies to leverage and capitalize on wage differences across countries [39]. This is clearly illustrated by intermediaries that perpetuate pay disparities across regions and intimidate workers with threats of relocation in response to labor organizing efforts on the ground. Despite requiring the same skill, effort, and investment, Emmanuel noted how tasks that were paid over 60 dollars per hour in the US were compensated barely over a dollar per hour in Kenya. Emmanuel articulated how exploitation is a built-in feature:

> We keep setting back to the [same] conversation, but the pay is terrible. If you just even increase the pay to, say, $3, that's a decent income for [Kenyan] people. If you can afford to pay someone in the US $60 for the exact same act, then I do not understand why you would want to pay people, say, $1 and then have them suffer. [...] We are stuck in a system that does not work.

Emmanuel highlighted a systemic devaluation of data labor in the Global South. Labor arbitrage took advantage of and reproduced wage differences by exploiting historical, cultural, and national political-economic conditions. Workers in Kenya experienced the consequences of labor regimes created thousands of miles away. Pay rates, performance metrics, and evaluation standards seemed to be set without regard for local living costs. Faith asked, "Where do you complain when you experience this [exploitation]? Where do you complain when you want a pay rise?" The physical distance between workers and lead firms constrained their capacity to seek recourse when contracts were mismanaged or payments withheld. The pay disparity is particularly notable for data workers on platforms, who have come to realize that their counterparts performing the same tasks or holding the same positions in other countries earn considerably more. They also tried to navigate this by using VPNs to access better-paid tasks that remain out of reach in Africa.

The threat of relocating operations elsewhere served a disciplinary goal. If workers were to organize, firms could easily shift projects or distribute tasks elsewhere. Companies would threaten to exit the country or, in practice, follow through if workers fight for better working conditions, or demand better wages, protections, or benefits. Joseph noted, "These people take advantage, because they know that [we] are desperate. So if we speak out, they might go to another desperate country. If that country speaks out, they might go to another desperate country. So I think as much as we are trying to champion this [organizing effort], it should be a global thing." Workers worried that leveraging labor bargaining power to challenge intermediary practices could risk the company moving

their business elsewhere, where a new exploitable labor pool is available.

Through global wage arbitrage, companies within the AI supply chain also created conditions to fragment potential transnational solidarities. Lilian described her frustration with seeing similar tasks compensated at far higher rates in India than in Kenya. During a recent visit to India, she observed how, despite these differences, workers in India were underpaid relative to local living standards. She characterized this as the companies' attempt to "divide-and-conquer", to fracture potential alliances through a disparity in compensation. By structuring labor in this way, workers across countries were positioned in competition with one another and it became possible to suppress collective action.

Workers understood that their experiences of exploitation shared similarities across borders. At the same time, they felt the severity of precarity differently. Gloria, who was promoted to the position of a trainer, could see the difference in pay and projects across regions. She noted, "Insofar as they had slightly higher pay, they also had the same experiences with us. *Everyone is always working on a glass floor.* [...] But then again, when letting go came for any trainer, Kenyans were laid off first. They could take our projects." Gloria highlighted how the lived experience of precarity was unevenly distributed. When layoffs were happening, Kenyan trainers were the first to be let go, with their projects reassigned to workers in other countries. So the glass floor that Gloria speaks of is not uniform. For Kenyan workers, it was more brittle and likely to crack first.

5.6 Sustaining the illusion of mobility

Upward mobility in data work involved moving from a tasker or annotator role to a trainer, quality analyst, or manager position. On the surface, such promotions would suggest a career path in data work. Workers welcomed the accompanying pay increase, however modest. However, this progression seldom translated into improved labor conditions or stability. Instead, higher-status roles carried additional forms of uncompensated shadow labor. Moreover, the illusory mobility opportunities not only keeps workers engaged, but also foster a dependency on this industry that gradually restricts and even forecloses their potential to explore alternative career paths.

Data workers who consistently performed well on tasks were often funneled into the demanding trainer role. As trainers, they were also expected to recruit workers and manage projects. Trainers were frequently assigned explicit targets for the number of recruits they were expected to onboard. When Lilian took on this role, she had to bring in over 40 people for her two daily shifts. Any possibility of meeting these quotas meant that workers had to draw on their personal and professional networks, including friends, family, or LinkedIn connections. This kind of network hiring was an all-consuming task. As a trainer, Gloria was responsible for finding individuals in her network who could procure hyper-specific machines for work. She explained, "Now it is upon me to figure out how to get those taskers. Imagine the project is hard and the pay is also not good. How are you going to convince these people to come and stay with you? [...] You are always recruiting people, trying to convince them that the platform is worth trying." Gloria worried that her team's underperformance would translate into disciplinary action or lost pay for her. In this way, the trainer-recruiter role became a mechanism through which the (re)-intermediary bore the cost of expanding the workforce.

The social recruitment expectations not only brought a lot of additional labor, but also impacted workers' relationships within their community. In sharing his experience of working as a trainer, Andrew expressed guilt that came with having to repeatedly misrepresent the nature of the work, exaggerating the pay or describing the job as more stable than it actually was:

> Had to lie. Tell people that. You know, this gig is promising. You guys will make money. And I personally have a story. I told a friend, a friend who saw me working on Remotasks and was interested. So I told him, 'You get a laptop. It's around $300. Get a laptop. I will train you. You will work.' And then the guy got a laptop and... there was no work. So I lied.

The referral system was structured akin to a pyramid scheme. The burden of recruitment on workers resulted in severed social relationships and reputational harm.

Much of the managerial work was offloaded onto the trainers. In doing so, platforms re-intermediated labor by turning workers like Gloria into de facto middle managers. She was responsible for coordinating, training, and retaining workers without having any institutional protection or authority herself. Gloria articulated the relational breakdowns in retaining workers after situations where entire batches of tasks have been rejected or large projects have been canceled. Re-intermediation also shifted vulnerability and danger onto workers. Andrew managed a project with an AI startup looking to outsource data work. His team was supposed to collect long videos with an audio description.

> "I employed people and reviewed materials for around 15,000 videos. 15,000 videos. I was not compensated, and they told me that the videos did not meet the qualifications. I had not talked to the client directly. I was dealing with the middleman, right? Yeah, they collected the data. These guys blamed me. I had to switch from my home to another place, just for my safety, because [other workers] were after me. I was depressed. The fuck. I was just into alcohol. The money was around $2,000 because I had already employed some reviewers, and I didn't know how to pay them, and these guys from [the startup] said that they won't pay."

As the coordinator, the outsourcing structure placed Andrew at the center of risk. In effect, re-intermediaries like Andrew shouldered the affective labor of managing worker frustration and the fallout of company decisions. He absorbed the responsibility of keeping workers motivated and loyal, whereas the platform and clients benefited from having layers of mediating workers whose role was to normalize/stabilize precarious arrangements.

Foreclosing alternative career trajectories. Shifting careers or returning to their original fields of training was rarely straightforward. Workers highlighted how long-term dependence on data work constrained their occupational mobility. Joseph, for example, is trained in accounting but has spent the past eight years in data work. To

compete within the accounting job market, he would need to invest in certifications and accept an entry-level position. With a family to support, he described this as impossible. He explained, "with these online jobs, the dark side of it is, normally, it diverts, or it consumes what you initially intended to do." Educated workers struggling to find professional jobs were trapped within the AI supply chain through wage dependency and a lack of recognition of their skills and professional experience.

Workers were actively accumulating new capacities through the everyday demands of data work. Yet, the skills that workers develop are splintered across short-term projects and client-specific demands and did not easily cohere into a formal professional trajectory. Over the last decade as a data worker, Andrew learned copywriting, translation, data labeling, project management, team management, and technical work like LIDAR. During the interview, he pulled up the thirty CVs he keeps prepared. Each CV was tailored to a skill set. Soon after, reflecting on what was difficult about this job, he immediately said, "The most difficult thing is that I have no CV." Andrew highlighted the irony of how his thirty CVs did not cohesively come together into one.

The institutional and contractual arrangements that mediate work denied workers the forms of documentation or validation that would render their labor legible to future employers. Workers repeatedly told us that they had nothing to show for years of doing data annotation work. Intermediaries did not provide certificates for skills learned on the job. Interviewees who worked with BPOs noted that their contracts often included non-compete clauses that limited their ability to seek alternative sources of income, including platform jobs. We see how workers had to often take on multiple jobs to make ends meet, but their years of experience with those 'secondary' jobs were not recognized. The non-compete and non-disclosure agreements restricted workers' immediate employment options and erased their professional histories. Dinah highlighted that she only had screenshots or emails as evidence of employment for platforms. They could not talk or write openly about their projects. Workers' ability to exit was limited because there was no portable proof of expertise. Workers' skills were locked inside platforms or contracts, so they would keep producing value they cannot carry elsewhere.

Despite their initial hopes, workers no longer bought into corporate rhetoric around "opportunity" or "flexible work". They recognized how companies leveraged local conditions of economic necessity to govern labor. Dinah asked a rhetorical question, "Why are these laws working in their countries? These tech companies know what is right and what is wrong. But they will run back to Africa and dump these jobs on us, because we are so desperate. We'll do anything to at least have a roof over our heads." Importantly, workers did not reject these jobs wholesale. Matthew articulated how "we do not have a problem with the tech companies bringing work. We have a problem with how they behave." They valued the work as a source of income and opportunity. Their concern is with conditions and compensation, not the abolition of data work itself.

6 Discussion

Our findings suggest that the contemporary data work industry is organized around a persistent and seemingly inescapable precarity—a regime of entrapment that consistently shapes the experiences of workers in Kenya. Precarity emerges as both the precondition for, and the outcome of, companies' exploitation of data workers. We now turn to a discussion of these findings through critical scholarship in HCI, CSCW and STS. First, we situate our findings within work examining the forms of precarity produced in and through platform-mediated work (Section 6). We then draw on supply chain capitalism to examine how companies take advantage of regulatory gaps across labor geographies (Section 6.2). Such arrangements, shaped by race, gender, and nationality, normalize extreme wage differentials, rendering it acceptable, for example, to pay Kenyan data workers only a fraction of California rates [136]. Finally, in Section 6.3, we outline opportunities for reorienting HCI research and scholarly practice toward better supporting data workers' interests and attending to transnational struggles across the AI supply chain.

6.1 Examining how precarity constrains collective resistance in data work

Neoliberal logics underpin the institutionalization of precarity [91] in data work through discursive tactics, employment misclassification [42], internalized competition, and limited state intervention. Building on prior work, we trace how techniques of governmentality [77] circulate across platforms and BPOs, even as they materialize in distinct ways. Across both settings, we observe a convergence in labor arrangements that echoes Zhang et al.'s [160] observation of hybrid management practices. Workers like Dinah described how Avala AI, for example, increasingly resembled a BPO by requiring full in-office shifts, while BPOs adopted short-term, project-based contracts that reproduced platform-like vulnerabilities. These shifts produce a hybrid regime in which workers face the disadvantages of both models and the benefits of neither, embedding precarity across outsourcing arrangements.

Within this regime, precarity becomes a taken-for-granted condition of work. Participants describe intensifying their efforts across multiple sites, combining BPO jobs with platform tasks or juggling several platforms, to stabilize their income while absorbing the risk of account bans or contract terminations. This normalization echoes accounts of how flexibility rhetoric and algorithmic management encourage workers to govern themselves according to market imperatives [157]. The "uberization" of data work depends on maintaining a large, on-demand workforce; platforms cultivate expansive labor reserves [6, 71], while BPOs keep workers "on the bench" to meet fluctuating client demand. An oversupply of labor within the global data work industry is continually leveraged to make mobilization feel risky or futile [150], reinforced by threats of retaliation or relocation. These threats are not abstract. The suspension of Remotask operations in Kenya and Sama's closure of its content moderation hub following lawsuits illustrate how easily transnational supply chains fragment attempts at collective action. Meanwhile, the absence of social protections—whether state-provided or intermediary-provided—forces workers to navigate

disputes alone and bear the full economic and emotional consequences. As Kaye-Essien [77] observes, neoliberalism's embrace of minimal state intervention enables platforms to exploit regulatory vacuums; our interviewees similarly described a retreating state that no longer enforces their labor rights and instead appears aligned with employers and capital.

Yet, neoliberalism does not operate in isolation. Critical STS scholars remind us that precarity must also be understood as situated within global histories of coloniality and racial capitalism [25, 145]. Companies in the AI supply chain draw on longstanding patterns of material and labor extraction, and workers' experience these dynamics in everyday ways. Two participants, Matthew and Dinah likened contemporary data work to forms of modern slavery, describing how algorithmic systems allocated better-paid and less burdensome projects to workers in other regions while Kenyan workers received the most demanding tasks. Workers were acutely aware of wage disparities and sought to demonstrate their capability in the face of structural devaluation (even as they navigated feelings of deep injustice), resonating with Melamed's framing of neoliberalism as yet "another form of racial capitalism" [95].

Against this backdrop, workers nonetheless demonstrate agency. Following Foucault's conception of power as circulating rather than unidirectional, and Fisher's notion of "parasitical resistance" [48, 84], we observe workers acting within—not outside—these structures [7]. Across broader platform economies, solidarities emerge precisely in response to algorithmic management and individualized competition [134, 159]. Workers politicize their conditions, engage in informal organizing [31, 76], and form networks aimed at collective resistance[8]. In contrast to traditional forms of organizing such as strikes or picket lines [134], Anwar [7] found that African platform workers assemble self-organized networks prioritizing endurance strategies over confrontational tactics, though both union and non-union worker-led organizations play a role in fostering broader advocacy [161].

While a full account of data worker organizing lies beyond the scope of this article, emerging initiatives illustrate how collective strategies are taking shape among data workers. In East Africa, the African Content Moderators Union (ACMU) and the Data Labelers Association (DLA) have begun to articulate demands around wages, contracts, psychological support, and workplace protections—often encountering resistance from companies and inconsistent support from state agencies [75]. Activists understand labor exploitation not as an isolated problem tied to specific intermediaries but as a structural feature of the global AI supply chain. Because relocation threatens workers everywhere, activists view their counterparts in other countries as allies in the fight for humane labor conditions rather than competitors. This orientation is reflected in the DLA's efforts to track exploitative practices across Africa, the launch of "Africa Tech Workers Rising, Kenya" [142] initiative connecting workers across the continent, and the formation of the Global Trade Union Alliance of Content Moderators [59]. Moreover, labor and civil society organizations such as DLA and Siasa Place also provide training, civic education, and rights-awareness programs, helping workers challenge neoliberal discourses that individualize risk and normalize competition. Such forms of reflection and collective action represent meaningful efforts to reshape worker subjectivities and to contest the power relations embedded within data supply chains.

6.2 Locating responsibility within the AI supply chain

Within the regime of entrapment, who should be held responsible for these labor conditions? Supply chain capitalism, as Tsing has argued, offers a functional analytic that helps to understand how these configurations distribute responsibility and outsource risk [137]. In AI supply chains, racialized, national, and linguistic differences are actively mobilized to sort entrepreneurial subjects into hierarchies of value, "blurring lines between self-exploitation and superexploitation" [136]. For Tsing, superexploitation is an intensification of exploitation along non-economic factors such as race, gender, nationality, or citizenship status [136]. This reflects Gloria's comments on how she felt that workers everywhere are working on a glass floor, but if trainers were to be fired, it would be Kenyans first. AI supply chains leverage precisely this diversity, these differences, to justify wage disparities and to maintain fragmented labor markets.

The difficulty of locating responsibility within AI supply chains is a built-in feature of how they are organized [151]. Data workers are frequently unaware of who the ultimate clients are or how their labor fits into larger systems of value creation for AI. The distance between lead firms and workers is geographical and operational, with layers of intermediaries acting as the buffer [102]. In our interviews, workers would typically identify the practices of exploitation as those of the intermediaries, most directly. This partial visibility is by design. What makes the supply chain attractive to companies is its capacity to create opacity of accountability across tech companies, BPOs/platforms, and governments [151].

The unique infrastructures of the data work industry constrain local worker organizing efforts. Unlike manufacturing or distribution supply chains that can be disrupted through choke-points (*e.g.,* sorting centers for Amazon [119]), AI supply chains are typically ephemeral because of short-term projects and high turnover. Data work is also usually carried out online, which makes the threat of relocating operations very real. As Silver has argued, "capitalists attempt to counter worker unrest by increasing automation (a technological fix) or advancing into newer spatial frontiers (a spatial fix)" [128]. The regime of entrapment is sustained by reminding workers that they can be replaced by cheaper labor elsewhere. At the same time, the use of non-disclosure agreements fractures peer activism among workers. Even when their work contributes to the same value chain, the conditions and the challenges workers in platforms and BPOs experience can be very different, and similarly, the interests in organizing. Again, we see how diversifying and dispersing labor is what sustains supply chain capitalism [136].

Regulation might appear as an avenue to address labor exploitation. Yet, our findings revealed how state intervention might be necessary but not sufficient. Interviewees spoke about how data work is increasingly professionalizing, yet their contribution to society is not recognized in the same way as other professions, which impacts the level of protection and rights. More importantly, state institutions prioritize attracting global investment and keeping unemployment rates low, often at the expense of workers' rights and dignified employment. The regime of entrapment thus benefits

from laxity of existing legal frameworks, which provide space for companies and intermediaries to deploy lobbying initiatives, exploit loopholes to their advantage, and evade responsibility for workers' welfare.

Understanding these limits requires a different orientation to political action. Mezzadra and Neilson [96] argue that the state and international system of states continue to shape labor, yet are "not powerful enough to confront contemporary capitalism; to reopen politically a perspective of radical transformation, something else, a different source of power, is absolutely necessary". Their idea of *dual-power* politics encourages "radical contestation of state institutions (and their entanglement with the operations of capital) even as it implies making demands of these same institutions or even redirecting their resources to oppositional ends" [96]. Applied to AI data work, a dual-power approach suggests that workers and allies could begin to contest the regime of entrapment in existing legal and regulatory spaces. However, it also insists on organizing other infrastructures of solidarity, such as mutual aid networks and cooperative structures that prefigure social movements.

6.3 Orienting research with/for data work toward prefigurative politics

A political project of transformation must start with a recognition that our aspirations to intervene are entangled in the systems we seek to disrupt. While the intensification of exploitation or *super*exploitation [136] made visible through the regime of entrapment, is evocative; there has been exceptional scholarship and journalism documenting the exploitation data workers endure [9, 103, 106, 118, 153]. Increasing visibility can help make labor conditions present in public discourse. Still, documentation does not alone dismantle the racialized precarity that underpins AI supply chain capitalism. Here, we find that it is important to sit with the specter of hopelessness and sense of "no alternative" [84]. Lindtner, Bardzell, and Bardzell [84] remind us how feminist sensibilities offer avenues for a research agenda that neither "falls back onto stories of technological promise" nor "shut[s] down alternatives [to capitalism] via stories of inevitability" [84]. In practice, this means resisting the impulse to narrate technology as emancipatory while also refusing the fatalism that treats exploitation as unavoidable. Instead, they call on researchers to notice the "spaces of [fragile] hope in the gaps and fissures of global capitalism", while staying, at best, cautiously optimistic.

These pockets of hope might emerge through prefigurative politics. Asad's notion of prefigurative design [11, 12] invites the possibility of creating counter-structures to uplift the justice work of community partners, redistribute resources and build relationship, instead of substituting for them. It could be productive to ask, how might HCI researchers leverage their adjacency with or participation in the tech industry? How might we respect workers' agency and epistemic authority, and offer the resources, tools and infrastructures to support their agendas? Beyond documenting labor conditions for academia, researchers can work as a community of practice to translate this knowledge for policy, organize workshops and trainings, connect workers with broader advocacy organizations, and give resources and visibility to local activism and community-led initiatives. Notably, researchers have developed standards to promote fair working conditions for platform-mediated work [15] and used worker-centered approaches to negotiate power imbalances [54]. In a report for the International Labor Organization, Berg et al. [15] outlined 18 criteria for fairer microwork, whereas the Fairwork [47] project regularly publishes reports evaluating different platforms against their five principles for fair working conditions.

Moreover, researchers and academic associations have called for transparency and ethical practices in outsourcing data work [127]. As AI research continues to grow, the demand for data work in academia has increased substantially, which positions researchers as important clients in the data work industry and necessitates more reflexivity and ethical self-regulation. The "Code of Ethics" of the Neural Information Processing Systems Conference explicitly addresses "fair wages", requesting academics to respect local minimum hourly rates when outsourcing data work [133]. The documentation framework for crowdsourced dataset annotation proposed by Díaz et al. [43] asks for transparency regarding working conditions, such as the availability of communication channels and compensation standards. Yang et al. [158] further outlined five key challenges in the outsourcing process and provided recommendations and good practices for academic requesters.

In line with the longstanding tradition in HCI and CSCW to advocate for methodologies that center communities' perspectives, needs and capabilities, such as action research [64, 65], assets-based design [58, 155, 156], and community-based approaches [34, 81], researchers have also sought to empower data workers and center their agency in driving transformative political changes. Turkopticon is a notable example [74], which was originally created as an activist tool for MTurk workers to evaluate their employers, and has later transformed into a worker-run advocacy group that provides vital resources and infrastructure for MTurk worker communities.[1] In addition, viewing workers as community researchers and experts, the Data Workers' Inquiry project [98] supports workers in leading research projects in their own workplaces and with their own visions, and facilitates labor organizing efforts, such as the formation of the African Content Moderation Union [92]. As part of this project, workers' grievances and petitions reached the European Parliament, which eventually led to the inclusion of data workers in the European "Platform Workers Directive" [111]. These projects point to the blurred boundaries between activism and academia [82] and open up to various roles researchers can take, such as facilitators and supporters, to center their epistemic authority, redirect resources to community experts, and facilitate collective actions.

Tsing's invitation to search for allies in the "midst of institutionalized alienation" offers another opening for building solidarities within and through scholarship [138]. Her articulation of a "latent commons," one that is "ubiquitous and undeveloped" and only aspires to "good enough" worlds, disrupts the expectation that our scholarship must be organized around utopian futures. Taken seriously, collaborations create opportunities for knowledge to circulate across sites, and for knowledge to have different ends. A latent commons then allows for both particularities and universals to emerge. It helps "identify knowledge that moves–mobile and

[1] https://blog.turkopticon.net/

mobilizing—across localities" [139]. In this spirit, latent commons might support an assembly of scholars for collective sensemaking across labor geographies.

We also believe the intensification of exploitation in Kenya invites a turning back to other field sites (where the practices might not have seemed so exploitative) but where there may well be systemic structures that we have missed. This commoning thus invites different cuts to be drawn around and through research and academic initiatives, and new allies to be formed that bring knowledge, expertise and political action together to see old questions anew and new questions otherwise. The presented work and team behind it we see as one such example.

How then might the latent commons support worker-led initiatives and transnational solidarities, when we are confronting a political struggle that is not resolved only through knowledge production? First, we echo critical scholars that advocate for taking seriously issues of political economy within the purview of HCI research and practice [45, 83, 154]. The task we would propose is to engage critically with the conditions that shape labor, to foreground workers' agendas, and to create the conditions for analytic and institutional collectives that are "here and now, amidst the trouble" [138, p. 15].

7 Limitations and Future Work

Several lines of analyses remain outside the scope of our paper, that we encourage future work to explore. Our study was not designed to investigate gender as an analytic category. While we did not observe any notable differences in relation to interviewees' identification of mechanisms of entrapment, we acknowledge that the affects of these forms of exploitation are likely differentially felt based on individuals' caring responsibilities and social position, among others. There is a central ambiguity regarding whether the regime of entrapment is deliberately orchestrated or emerges through disjointed practices that nonetheless entrap workers. This opacity points to the value of a 'studying up' approach [109], for example, through discourse analysis of corporate reports, or interviews with managers to understand the decisions and rationales that influence workers' labor conditions. We also recognize that our engagement with Foucault's notion of neoliberal governmentality only begins to capture the complexities of neoliberalism, as neoliberal logics are mediated by local cultural, political, and economic conditions. It would thus be important to examine what kinds of contradictions or resistances emerge in the figure of the entrepreneurial subject in Kenya.

8 Conclusion

We conducted semi-structured interviews with Kenyan data workers, documenting testimonies about the labor conditions they experience within the AI supply chain. Our findings suggest that the configuration of the contemporary data work industry depends on a seemingly inescapable draw of precarity that is remarkably consistent across workers' experiences: a regime of entrapment. Precarity would seem both the precondition and the outcome of companies' exploitation of data workers. Through the lenses of neoliberal governmentality and supply chain capitalism, we surface how this regime has made worker mobilization and labor justice uniquely challenging, despite the continued efforts of workers, researchers, and advocates. We invite researchers to reorient their research towards prefigurative politics by closely examining the conditions of labor that sustain the entire AI value chain. We thus seek a future focused on broadening the coalition of stakeholders in reimagining AI.

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