

**Addressing Labor Rights Exploitation in the Global Tech Industry: A Collaborative Platform Proposal (Technical Report)**

**Addressing Labor Rights Exploitation in the Global Tech Industry: A Collaborative Platform Proposal (STS Research Paper)**

A Thesis Prospectus  
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School of Engineering and Applied Science  
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Bachelor of Science in Computer Science

By  
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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

**ADVISORS**

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**Overview:**

My research topic is the exploitation of workers in the tech industry, particularly in China involving the "996" work culture and the associated labor rights abuse, as well as in countries such as Pakistan (where I have worked briefly), and India where exploitation even takes on the form of outsourcing. I plan to explore this topic by dissecting a case study on factories in China as my main methodology. This paper additionally aims to shed light on the darker side of technology outsourcing (a topic that is not commonly brought up in modern discourse), through the lens of Actor Network Theory.

**Problematization:**

The main problem that I will be addressing is the ongoing exploitation of workers in the tech industry, especially in China where large tech companies have been able to normalize a "996" work culture among their labor force, where employees are expected to work 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week. Such values are pushed by industry leaders, which are still violations of labor laws in China (Wang, Jenny Jing. "How Managers Use Culture and Controls to Impose a '996' Work Regime in China That Constitutes Modern Slavery." *Accounting & Finance*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2020, pp. 4331–4359). In India, many tech companies outsource their work in order to take advantage of the cheap labor costs, which leads to them being paid low wages and to work in poor conditions. Meanwhile Pakistan lacks proper labor laws and regulations, which leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation. While it is an international issue, the main focus of this prospectus will still be 996 work culture in China.

**Main Argument and Projected Outcomes:**

Thus, my main argument is how the 996 work culture and outsourcing practices in the tech industry contribute to the exploitation of workers in China, Pakistan and India (and the

world at large), and what can be done to address these labor rights abuses. My research aims to address the problem by challenging the dominant ways of thinking (of industry leaders) and suggesting policy changes through an STS lens, with a focus on power relations and the intersection of technology and labor. By analyzing the 996 work culture and outsourcing practices, my research would aim to empower the communities affected by these practices and to promote social justice for workers in the tech industry. By viewing the problem through the lens of actor network theory, I aim to show how tech leaders have been able to establish a toxic work culture in China by identifying the actors involved (Chinese government, tech leaders, tech workers) and how they interact and contribute to the problem. One of the shortcomings of ANT (actor network theory) being that it struggles to show power dynamics, I could overcome this limitation by including qualitative data from interviews or surveys with workers to provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and how power operates in their workplaces. I could also use a modified version of ANT that incorporates power dynamics, highlighting the unequal relationships between actors in a network.

### **Technical Project Description:**

While I'm not making a technical project, I have internship experience where I worked with a software company in Pakistan which handles partially outsourced projects and partially local projects. I worked on a project where we designed the private equity management system for local banks in frameworks such as Angular and React. Many of my coworkers were working on the outsourced projects, which is where I witnessed first hand some of the exploitation associated with outsourced work. Some of my coworkers had to work more hours for severely less pay than other workers on the same project who were located in a more developed country (Germany, in this instance). With this in mind, if I were to make a technical project, it might

involve developing a web-based platform using React that would allow workers, unions, NGOs etc to share information, data and insights about working conditions and labor rights violations in the tech industry. It could also include machine learning algorithms to detect patterns and trends in labor rights abuse. This would help bring attention to labor rights exploitation and help people who are being exploited. The application could also include a database of companies that have been involved in violating labor rights and a feature for allowing users to rate companies based on their labor practices. This would help people make more informed decisions about where they work or buy products from, and would simultaneously put more pressure on companies to improve their labor practices. Finally, the application could also include a chat bot feature that could answer questions about labor rights, with an option to report violations directly through the platform.

### **Preliminary Literature Review and Findings:**

After examining my annotated bibliography, I have found that there is extensive and detailed documentation on the 996 work culture in China. There are several researchers that have done intimate fieldwork in China, analyzing the work culture and labor rights exploitation first hand. As such, there is not much more significant information about the 996 work culture in China that my paper could bring to light which hasn't already been covered. However, while performing my preliminary literature review I discovered that there is a severe shortage of coverage on the issues of unequal pay and workload associated with outsourcing in countries India and Pakistan. In fact, I had difficulty finding articles on this specific topic at all. The rare couple of articles I did find focused on the cultural difficulties with outsourcing such as language barriers, different work cultures (Weinstein, Lauren. "Outsourced and out of control". ACM 47, 2 (February 2004), 120), as well as the concept of "Clickwork" - repetitive, low wage tasks for

long work hours which has become especially popular in outsourced work (Kersley, Andrew. "Clickwork and Labor Exploitation in the Digital Economy." Computer Weekly, 6 Dec. 2022, pp. 25 - 29). While these articles were insightful, they do not attempt to tackle the institutional problem with outsourcing and do not attempt to offer any solutions, which my paper aims to do. (So, this presents an opportunity for my work to build on the existing approaches used to analyze the 996 work culture in China, by expanding the scope of this research to include countries like India and Pakistan. While there have been communities online and offline, nonprofits, and students that are working on this issue, there is simply a severe lack of literature on the specific topic. This paper also aims to fix this by providing more insight into the labor exploitation in such countries, as well as suggesting possible policy and organizational changes in the international tech space.

### **STS Project Proposal:**

STS, to me, is the intersection between the development of technology and the betterment of society. Moreover, it is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to understand the social, political, cultural, and ethical dimensions of science and technology. My project is an STS project because it seeks to analyze the intersection of technology and labor in the context of China, Pakistan, and India, and how this intersection shapes power relations and contributes to the exploitation of workers. Additionally, with my proposed technical project, by providing a platform for workers to report violations and share information, my research aims to challenge power structures in the tech industry and empower workers to advocate for their rights.

I am approaching this problem mainly through the lens of policy. With race and class being such a cultural issue in countries like India and Pakistan, these factors may also be in play. The primary authors I will be using are Andrew Kersley ("Clickwork and Labor Exploitation in

the Digital Economy." *Computer Weekly*, 6 Dec. 2022, pp. 25 - 29"), Jenny Jing Wang ("How Managers Use Culture and Controls to Impose a '996' Work Regime in China That Constitutes Modern Slavery." *Accounting & Finance*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2020, pp. 4331–4359), and Lauren Weinstein ("Outsourced and out of control". *ACM* 47, 2 (February 2004), 120). Jenny Wang's article is a great exploration of the tactics that tech leaders use in normalizing labor exploitation, as well as the cultural factors that lead to such exploitation. This is a great case study for the toxic practices that institutions use to propagate similar exploitation in countries such as Pakistan and India. China serves as a cautionary tale for the rest of the world. Andrew Kersley's article on clickwork is very apt for the purposes of my paper. I have witnessed people in Pakistan working jobs that could constitute clickwork first hand. Countries like these that struggle with poverty and unemployment are ripe targets for such digital outsourcing exploitation. Finally, Lauren Weinstein's work is also very relevant since she provides a balanced and thorough overview of several negative outcomes associated with outsourcing, many of which apply in the case of Pakistan and India.

My main methodology consists of a case study analysis of factories in China, a literature review and analysis on existing research on exploitation associated with outsourced tech work to explore how technology is used to monitor and control workers as well as the larger political and economic structures that enable the role of technology in perpetuating labor exploitation in the tech industry. I aim to use Actor Network Theory (ANT) to understand how different actors, such as tech leaders, workers, and governments, interact and contribute to the problem of labor rights abuses in the tech industry. Through this lens, I seek to challenge dominant ways of thinking and suggest policy changes that can empower communities affected by these practices and promote social justice for workers in the tech industry.

## **Barriers and Boons:**

One significant challenge is the fact that the specific topic of labor exploitation associated with outsourced tech work is a rather niche topic, and there is limited current literature on it. Moreover, since I am using actor network theory, another limitation is that ANT struggles to show power dynamics, which would have to be overcome through extensive interviews. Additionally, there has not been deep and thorough fieldwork in India or Pakistan before to gauge the extent and details of the labor exploitation occurring there. Such fieldwork and hands on work is something that I am rather inexperienced with. To overcome these challenges, conducting interviews and getting involved with the community where exploitation is occurring would be greatly beneficial for the purposes of my research. As a Pakistani citizen who has worked in a software company there in the past, I feel that I would be in a good position to begin conducting such fieldwork.

## **References:**

1. Wang, Jenny Jing. "How Managers Use Culture and Controls to Impose a '996' Work Regime in China That Constitutes Modern Slavery." *Accounting & Finance*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2020, pp. 4331–4359, <https://doi.org/10.1111/acfi.12682>
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3. Kersley, Andrew. "CLICKWORK AND LABOR EXPLOITATION IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY." *Computer Weekly*, 6 Dec. 2022, pp. 25 - 29. <https://www.computerweekly.com/feature/Clickwork-and-labour-exploitation-in-the-digital-economy>