In the shadow of the mountain: the crisis of precarious livelihoods in high altitude mountaineering tourism

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Abstract

This article focuses on the crisis of precarious work/livelihoods that pervades the global tourism industry and prevents many from experiencing fair and just employment. Drawing on an ethnographic study of high-altitude mountaineering tourism in the Himalaya, we explore the various ways in which mountain workers are precarious, vulnerable, marginalised and often overlooked in the context of cross-border tourism practices. Drawing on concepts of justice and fairness we argue that the ongoing racial and social contours of colonialism give privileges to some bodies and not 'Others', entrenching precarity of vulnerable communities and workers. However, despite these unfavourable conditions, local workers are not without agency to shape their conditions and experiences. Mountain workers on Everest provide an example of how, despite their precarity, workers can self-organise and exercise their voice to secure more just and equitable work. Decent work, secure livelihoods, and equality are core features of the sustainable development goals and will only be achieved through collective action, solidarity from different tourism stakeholders and the realisation of fair and just employment practices for the most vulnerable communities.

Keywords: Colonialism, mountaineering tourism, justice and fairness, power relations, workers' rights

Introduction

Precarity of work in (and beyond) tourism is a global crisis that affects poor and vulnerable communities most severely. Rural areas/communities in the Global South, given the cash-poor situation many find themselves in, can be especially eager for new economic prospects, such as those promised by tourism, regardless of the working environments or risks they may pose. For traditionally agrarian communities, nature-based adventure tourism has provided new and interesting opportunities to earn cash and stimulate regional development, however, these financial incentives have led to significant evolutions in rural livelihoods such as the abandonment of agrarian activities (Bennike et al, 2020). As Bianchi and de Man note (2021), tourism development often disrupts native economies, resulting in the emergence of inequalities, the "monetisation of nature and dehumanisation of labour" (p. 354), a loss of self-reliance, and often precipitates a movement towards the enclosure of common pool resources into commercialised assets leveraged by the tourism industry.

International tourism involves many 'grey areas' regarding employment and is heavily implicated in the emergence of precarious work/livelihoods as a defining feature of contemporary capitalist societies (de Beer, Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014). Many international tour operators active in the Global South have benefited greatly from the 'eagerness' of local workers, which has precipitated low pay, limited worker protections, poor working conditions, and a lack of opportunities for workers to voice their opinions and concerns through formal channels (Lee, Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015; Shircliff, 2020). Baum et al. (2016) argue that work is fundamental to discourses of sustainability, but is a topic widely neglected in examinations of sustainable tourism. Ioannides, Gyimóthy and James (2021) also note the surprising lack of attention paid to work and workers in tourism sustainability discourse, especially given the widespread precariousness of tourism work and workers. We respond to the calls of these authors to consider tourism work and workers as central to debates about tourism sustainability, focusing on the global crisis of precarious work and livelihoods in tourism.

We argue that precarious livelihoods *and* lives of local workers, who in the case explored here are Indigenous peoples, present a crisis which international tour operators often benefit from due to a lack of organisation, internalised histories of marginalisation, scarcity of voice and bargaining power, among other issues. Matters related to work are ultimately concerned with distributive and procedural justice (Jamal & Camargo, 2014) in international tourism as well as issues of representation, dignity and recognition (Camargo and Vazquez-Maguirre, 2021). As Munck (2013, p. 752) has argued, "decent work has never been the norm in the postcolonial world". In relation to Indigenous groups whose social histories involve forced assimilation, discrimination, dispossession and cultural misappropriation by the global tourism industry, we need to ask, what can fair and just employment look like in these contexts?

The crisis of precarious work and livelihoods which plays out in the case of high-altitude mountaineering tourism in South Asia demonstrates how crises are exacerbated by diverse and intersectional vulnerabilities (Hopkins, 2021). While we do consider the tragic events of the 2014 disaster on Mount Everest which killed 16 local, Indigenous Nepalese workers, this in itself is not the crisis we explore, but rather the crisis is precariousness which funnels workers towards risky labour in the global adventure tourism industry. As Bianchi and de Man (2021) note, relatively powerful tourism actors can weaken the regulatory environment and the collective capacity of labourers to resist exploitation. Powerful actors can also benefit from weak regulatory environments, lack of protections for workers, and worker precarity as a lack of options and opportunities to express dissent with working practices enable unfair and unjust practices to continue.

We draw on justice literature to unveil how various high-altitude mountaineering tourism actors/stakeholders, such as international mountain tour operators and guiding agencies, have primarily

adopted a utilitarian and neoliberal ethics (Guia, 2021) towards their relationships with local workers. We thus explore unjust, unfair, and unsafe practices in this example of a working environment which, though extreme, shows parallels with other forms of rural adventure tourism in a wide variety of contexts. Similarly disadvantaged workforces are funneled towards risky work *because of* intersecting vulnerabilities. Furthermore, unsustainable employment practices can amplify and exacerbate the precariousness of (some) lives, which are positioned as less valuable and visible than others. Decent work for everyone is a critical component of sustainable tourism. Although the local mountain workers in this study are undoubtedly precarious - in terms of their lives and survival as well as in their employment - they are not without agency to challenge some aspects of their situation and improve their working conditions. We thus argue that high altitude mountaineering tourism illustrates some of the extremes of risk and vulnerability inherent in the global crisis of precarious work in tourism, but also demonstrates the potential for workers and other actors to unite in order to have their voices heard, and resist-to-transform their working conditions leading to greater social justice and equity as an important constituent of sustainable tourism practices.

The global crisis of precarious work

Work is an economic necessity for (most) people and forms a major element of daily life. However, the poor quality of work across the tourism sector is well-documented; characterised by low wages, minimal worker benefits and protections, long hours, unpredictability, low skills, few opportunities for progression, and high levels of discrimination, exploitation and sometimes even abuse (Baum et al., 2016; Mooney, Harris & Ryan, 2016). This has consequences for workers' ability to provide for themselves and their families, to plan ahead, for mental and physical health and well-being, and for issues of social justice and fairness, issues that should be at the heart of sustainable tourism (Ioannides, Gyimóthy & James, 2021). This is compounded by the precariousness of much tourism work, which leaves workers with limited power to organise, advocate for themselves and others, and resist the neoliberal pressures of the global tourism industry that reduce workers to resources in service to the needs of capitalist interests.

The importance of work to issues of justice and sustainability is acknowledged through the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs), notably SDG8, decent work and economic growth. Decent work is defined by the ILO (1999: 15) as "[p]roductive work under conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity, in which rights are protected and adequate remuneration and social coverage are provided." On the surface, this sounds like a promising aspiration for trying to improve working lives and opportunities for everyone, including the most vulnerable. However, the tying of decent work to economic growth illustrates the ways in which both the SDGs and the ILO's decent work agenda are based in free market principles that limit more radical opportunities to rethink work in ways that would be fairer and more equitable, leaving current neoliberal power structures and the unequal distribution of resources untouched (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). Indeed, as Winchenbach, Hanna and Miller (2019) argue, dignity at work is difficult to achieve in neoliberal organisations and sectors, like tourism, where hierarchy, precariousness and unequal power shape employment relationships and practices.

Precariousness is increasingly a characteristic of most jobs in most geographic locations (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). Precarious work is that which is "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker" (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 2); a description which encompasses much work in tourism. Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) argue that the global precarization of the labour force is not just a temporary shift in the balance of power between labour and capital, but the emergence of a new stage in the political economy of modernity. As such, it represents a global crisis that is leading to increasing levels of inequality and injustice, within and beyond tourism. This crisis is exacerbated by four distinct but interrelated forces: de-unionisation and the lack of collective organisation to protect workers' interests; financialization of the

economy, wherein the power of shareholders eclipses that of other stakeholders like workers, driving outsourcing and downsizing; globalisation, which has sharpened competition between workers around the world and accelerated the mobility of capital; and, the digital revolution, which is decreasing the need for labour, driving the rise of the gig economy and redefining workers as independent contractors who bear the risks previously handled by organisations (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). All of these forces can be seen to be shaping the tourism industry and contributing to the growing crisis of worker precarity.

Within this context, workers are left vulnerable to market forces, with little opportunity to resist, as Lee, Hampton and Jeyacheya (2015) found in their examination of precarious work in the tourism industry in the Seychelles. However, although limited, there are opportunities for challenge and resistance. Drawing on Hirschman (1970), Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) identify three possible responses to the growing crisis of precarious work. The first is exit, whereby workers leave the organization or industry that is failing to reciprocate their commitment. This response is common in the tourism industry, which suffers from high labour turnover (Asimah, 2018). However, this response is not available to everyone, and especially the most vulnerable workers who have few alternative opportunities. Another response is loyalty, wherein workers retain allegiance to the organisation/sector, even in the face of deteriorating conditions. This response is common among more highly skilled workers and can be seen within sections of the tourism industry wherein workers accept the precariousness of their jobs and lives in return for meagre progression opportunities. The third response, and to Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) the most promising in terms of social change and justice, is voice, where workers mobilise and demand improved conditions. Opportunities for workers to express voice and mobilise individually or collectively are limited in most sectors of the tourism industry, which is fragmented, geographically dispersed and has weak unionisation (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). However, although constrained, opportunities for tourism workers to exercise voice and drive change are possible, as we illustrate below in relation to high altitude workers on Everest.

Rising precariousness in work represents a growing trend in countries in the Global North, yet it is not a new phenomenon in the Global South where work and employment has often been informal and precarious (Hewison & Kalleberg, 2013). However, although not a new phenomenon, precariousness is shifting globally, and forms of informality and precariousness are shaped by global forces, organisations and supply chains. Consequently, the growth of precariousness can be seen as a case of "the West following the Rest", leading to rising inequality, and a race to the bottom in terms of workers' rights, protections and opportunities (Bremen & van der Linden, 2014), and this is, we suggest, a global crisis. Hammer and Ness (2021) argue that precariousness is embedded in concrete historical, political and social contexts and therefore extremely heterogeneous, combining global forces of neoliberalism with local social relations of caste, community, gender, ethnicity and religion. There is thus a need to examine experiences of precarious work and workers in specific local contexts in order to identify both the constraints and opportunities to challenge and ultimately transform the global crisis of precarious work in the tourism industry, as we do below through our examination of high-altitude mountaineering tourism in the Himalaya.

Justice perspectives in sustainable tourism

This article is concerned with employment practices in the high-altitude mountaineering tourism industry in Nepal and specifically we explore employment of local Indigenous Nepalese workers on Mount Everest. In justice literature, authors have explored fair and just practices in employment (see Bianchi & de Man, 2021; Shelly, Ooi & Denny, 2021). Specifically within an Indigenous tourism context, Camargo and Vazquez-Maguirre (2021) propose five guiding principles for dignity-based, humanistic approaches to work in tourism. Rastegar and Ruhanen (2021) explore local knowledge sharing in order to build more sustainable tourism practices. In this article, we explore a cross-border employment context which is prevalent in the adventure tourism industry. Many small to medium adventure tourism enterprises (SMEs)

indirectly hire local work force through local tour operators. We argue that cross-border employment contexts allow international actors, such as SMEs, to side-step involvement in the fight for local workers rights and improvement of working conditions. Nearly half of all those who have died on Mount Everest were Nepalese workers (Miller & Mair, 2020), amounting to hundreds of local workers. This does not include those maimed by frostbite, permanently injured, or debilitated by post-traumatic stress, nor does it capture deaths and injuries which have occurred on other mountains on which similar figures can be reported.

As Whitford and Ruhanen (2016) describe, indigenous peoples (who make up 15% of the world's poor) often engage with tourism to solve issues of extreme poverty of which the root causes are exclusion, political marginalisation, lack of rights, and histories of violence and assimilation. Camargo and Vazquez-Maguirre (2021) note that, for Indigenous peoples who have experienced histories of marginalisation, tourism "can perpetuate or exacerbate postcolonial dynamics that affect Indigenous people's sense of self-worth and self-respect" (p. 373). Since its inception, high-altitude mountaineering has privileged white, European bodies and ignored the deaths of hundreds of local workers as sacrificial, unimportant, undervalued, and undignified. Furthermore, the 'first ascents' of these mountains, and indeed the many ascents to follow, are predominantly represented as Western achievements despite the vital role that local workers have *always* played. Within tourism, increasingly scholars are employing justice literature to unveil and question deeply problematic histories as they come into conjunction with tourism through heritage (see Fortenberry, 2021). Eurocentric and colonial histories are tangibly celebrated, conserved and restored while subaltern cultural heritages are underrepresented, hidden or forgotten (Fortenberry, 2021). We pay attention to this here given how social justice starts with the moral fact that recognition of social histories, historical injustices, and subaltern contributions are necessities and preconditions of imagining more sustainable futures (Honneth, 2004), be that in tourism or otherwise.

Dignity for Indigenous peoples in a tourism context is especially under-researched (Camargo & Vazquez-Maguirre, 2021), yet affronts to dignity for Indigenous peoples or precarious workers are abound in tourism. To combat this Camargo et. al., (2020) put forward five guiding principles for humanistic management in tourism contexts; self-determination and self control, decent and meaningful tourism work, prioritisation of entrepreneurial activities, recognition, and oneness. Meaningful objectives under these categories include providing decent jobs to help people escape poverty, ensuring the availability of resources and support (such as training), transforming how Indigenous groups are valued and represented, among others (Camargo et al., 2020). Camargo and Vazquez-Maguirre (2021) further extend Camargo et al.'s framework to include three 'dignity thresholds'; restoration, protection, and promotion, and give guiding responsibilities for government and industry. However, the framework does not pay attention to cross border complications in situations where a weak, unmotivated and disingenuous regulator (government) might fail to enact meaningful policy to protect Indigenous peoples as they work in the tourism industry. Furthermore, Camargo and Vazquez-Maguirre's example primarily focuses on a megaproject and not the context of international SME's operating in an ad-hoc, coattail development context (void of true community planning) which is often the case in rural adventure tourism contexts. While the scale may not resonate with that of a mega-project, there is ample opportunity nonetheless for exploitative working practices to occur in adventure tourism contexts in and beyond the Himalaya. Given the multi-generational nature and severity of impacts which Himalayan mountaineering has had on local workers, it is nonetheless a critical issue to investigate.

As Shelly et al., (2021) note, access to procedural justice might not solve the social and cultural interpretations of how justice might appear as social contexts vary greatly, for example, perspectives of justice might have multiple sources of discontent. Polyphonic accounts, while incorporating a multitude of

voices, are still narrated from a single position whereas a cacophony of voices can reveal the social complexity and ambiguity of situations (Shelly et al., 2021). Feelings of discontent in and between groups, from multiple subjective positions, are manifested here in this study. We incorporate a cacophony of voices in this paper, however, predominantly we allow workers to speak for themselves in regard to what they feel is unfair or unjust and whom they feel is predominantly the source of this unfairness. Furthermore the event which we examine, the 2014 avalanche/disaster on Mount Everest, details the risks of not hearing or heeding such voices in the first place.

Guia (2021) outlines three critical justice parameters; responsibility, solidarity, and advocacy, and discusses how or whether these parameters are integrated into ethical approaches/regimes. Solidarity refers to a sense of social cohesion, empathy and awareness as well as commitment and readiness to act, and can merge into the political realm when solidarity members demonstrate such commitments by challenging sources of injustice (Guia, 2021). Advocacy inspired approaches to developing more just forms of tourism might rewrite colonial histories from subaltern perspectives (cultural advocacy), leverage the moral values of powerful actors to encourage humanitarian advocacy, or influence policy making through lobbying (political advocacy) (Guia, 2021). Responsibility breaks into three further types; *social responsibility* in which the motivation towards responsible acts is driven by moral, socially determined factors, *relational responsibility* is more altruistically motivated by a moral relationality which puts the Other before one's self-interest, and *political responsibility* which is taken up by actors wishing to advance justice within a given system for vulnerable or poorly represented groups (Guia, 2021). It is critical to discuss how tourism in a variety of contexts can enact more just and sustainable policies facilitated by positive, justice inspired, behaviours/actions on behalf of key stakeholders such as international SMEs and of course tourists themselves. However, the relatively small-scale, transnational nature of the adventure tourism product, especially those occurring in weak regulatory environments of the Global South, often impairs any initiative towards just behaviours given that action is largely voluntary and altruistically motivated, based on individual moral ethics, and predominantly avoidant of political involvement.

In an ideal world, stakeholders with vested interests in a particular tourism system, such as international mountaineering SMEs, would examine critical interdependencies within a tourism system and work towards improving the system as a whole to make it safer for staff and tourists, and to develop more socially and ecologically sustainable practices. While there has been evidence of this occurring in the mountaineering tourism industry in Nepal, it is also arguable that some of the most obvious actions have not been consistently deployed by global SMEs, such as investment in the technical, safety related, mountain skills of the local workforce which ultimately weakens the overall system. In this particular example, injustices have arisen due to how priority has been given to the knowledge or goals of more powerful stakeholders which has resulted in long-term resentment and feelings of underappreciation. As Rastegar and Ruhanen (2021) note asymmetry in power is a key challenge to developing more sustainable forms of tourism, for which they recommend 'safe spaces' for workers or local people to inform processes of knowledge creation (knowledge management) and organisational justice. Ignoring local voices and knowledge, and the lack of a safe space to share discontents about safety issues, poor working conditions, concerns about recognition and respect, etc., have resulted in explosive, even violent social situations on Mount Everest and beyond. Hearing voices that are marginalised is incredibly important to sustainable and just tourism (Shelly et al., 2021) however, how these are operationalised and incorporated into management practices is another matter. Safe spaces can help workers to voice concerns, especially within the context of a precarious Indigenous workforce who are dependent upon the work offered, most often politically unorganised, and who have experienced histories of racialized marginalisation within their own national context (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2021). In such situations of pronounced power asymmetries, it becomes all

the more important given how *not* speaking up and *not* speaking out is an engrained behaviour for marginalised peoples.

While the above noted approaches give a direction for creating more sustainable employment practices in tourism, the contexts of colonialism, racialized inequalities, and cross-border indirect employment needs to be considered when key stakeholders have no legal entity anchored in the local context. In this situation, responsibility falls squarely on local workers who, in the case of Nepal, need to face off politically with the Nepalese government, which is a conglomeration of political parties that from 1996-2006 waged a violent nationwide civil conflict during the 'people's war' where half-a-million people were displaced, 13,000 people died, and thousands were maimed or are missing (Hepburn, 2012). The case example explored in this paper of the 2014 avalanche/disaster on Everest illustrates these themes and demonstrates how ignoring local knowledge and local voices by policy makers or key stakeholders has resulted in a problematic system that has failed to address the concerns of vulnerable or precarious stakeholders.

Study Context: high altitude mountaineering tourism

In 2019 Nepal welcome nearly 1.2 million tourists, most of whom were from India, China, Europe, or the US (Nepal Ministry of Culture & Tourism, 2019). In 2019, 16% of these tourists reported mountain-based leisure as their priority with the most popular areas being the Annapurna Conservation Area (181, 746), Chitwan National Park (142, 486), and the Sagamartha National Park (57,289) where the Khumbu Valley and Everest are located (Nepal Ministry of Culture & Tourism, 2019). The Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued 658 permits for foreign climbers on 8000m peaks (8000ers) in Nepal for all of 2019, of which 393 were attributed to Everest; 405 climbers were successful in their summit attempts, and there were 22 deaths on all the peaks combined of both foreign climbers and local workers (Nepal Ministry of Culture & Tourism, 2019). The permit to climb Mount Everest as issued by the ministry costs $11,000 USD, while other 8000ers such as Lhotse cost $1800. For the Ministry, permit fees are a multi-million-dollar industry, while tourism in general generates nearly $400 million USD in Nepal each year (Nepal Ministry of Culture & Tourism, 2019). The pinnacle of earning potential for a mountain worker in Nepal is to work/guide on Everest where they can earn between $3-6,000 USD per season, not including tips. By comparison, in Nepal, the annual salary of a university-trained individual might pay roughly the same amount. Until 2014, life insurance provided to workers who lost their lives on Everest was, depending on the situation, anywhere from $500 USD to a maximum of $4000 USD. Central to the history of Himalayan mountaineering, and indeed many colonial exploits globally, is the forgotten, unappreciated, and most often nameless local worker of whom none fits the bill more poignantly than the Sherpa.

The word 'sherpa' has two meanings— capitalized [Sherpa] it connotes an ethnic group, while lower case [sherpa] it describes a job category (Frydenlund, 2019). Throughout this paper, however, we show preference for the term worker as many high-altitude workers are not ethnic Sherpa though they are referred to as such. From the beginning of Himalayan mountaineering local Indigenous mountain peoples have been employed as porters tasked with doing the most arduous and often risky work on the mountain (Ortner, 1999). Over this time, hundreds of Nepalese or local Indigenous workers have died on various mountains throughout the Himalaya and South Asia while their families receive limited protections financially or from the significant trauma that such tragedies trigger (Miller & Mair, 2020). Partially, what feeds into this situation is the social and political marginalisation that Indigenous mountain peoples have experienced in Nepal which increased their levels of precarity. For example, the legal principle of Mulukhi Ain allows many privileges to the Hindu elite over non-Hindu castes which has even allowed land expropriation and barring lower caste workers from certain jobs; this legacy has been disastrous for ethnic minorities in Nepal

(Frydenlund, 2019). Tourists and tourism development often have the proclivity to wander haphazardly into local politics, power struggles, and existing inequalities between varying ethnic groups. High-altitude mountaineering tourism is no different and the result is that there has been a significant void in terms of meaningful policy which is underpinned by caste-related social realities. In Nepal, the expectation by international actors that the Ministry of Tourism might take a central role in developing proactive policies concerning mountain work fails to predict or understand how historical racialized social inequalities intersect with mountain work. There have been multiple failures on all sides when it comes to the regulatory environment on Mount Everest which is again driven by the apolitical cross-border context and the coattail development setting. However, in this paper we treat the local worker as the most vulnerable and precarious member of the tourism system and as such we are predominantly critical of the roles that more powerful actors have played or failed to play.

Methodology:

The ethnographic experience is one of embodied, corporeal knowledges whereby the emic, immersed researcher is socially and emotionally invested or even entangled in the field (Trondman & Willis, 2002; Pockock, 2015). The below noted field locations are important sites of the high-altitude performance and are predominantly linked together through the global phenomenon of mountaineering which is historically rooted in colonial exploration, empire building and masculine performativity (Frohlick, 2000; Purtschert, 2020). The high-altitude experience as a product necessitates a multi-sited approach (Marcus, 1995) which physically 'follows the thing' (Cook & Harrison; 2007) through its various sites of production. The 'sites' of production are both physical locations (e.g. basecamps, mountain routes, and summits), as well as imaginative or imaginary depictions of the phenomenon; discursively and digitally shaped impressions of such spaces. In advance of the ethnographic fieldwork, an extensive review of high-altitude literature, documentaries, and various other forms of media (both academic and popular literature) was performed to give the study a historical foundation. This prepared the lead author to enquire whilst in the field about events which have shifted the socio-cultural landscape of Himalayan mountaineering during interviews, such as the 2014 avalanche explored here.

This research draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author during the 2019 spring and summer mountaineering seasons in the Greater Himalayan Range. The project sought to explore the emotional and affective aspects of high-altitude mountaineering tourism and one of the key concerns was to understand local workers' emotional experiences of high-altitude mountain guiding and labour. Over the space of 150 days during the Spring and Summer of 2019, the lead author was immersed in the social world of high-altitude mountaineers whilst living at various staging points such as the Mount Everest basecamp (EBC) and K2 basecamp (K2BC) in Pakistan. During that time, 75 formal semi-structured group and individual interviews were conducted with 93 participants who were gathered through a snowball approach. Interviews were conducted in English with a variety of stakeholders; international mountain guides (IMGs) and/or tour operators (IMTOs), Nepalese and Pakistani mountain guides/workers (local workers) and tour operators (LMTOs), other local industry stakeholders, and guided clients (i.e. mountaineering tourists). Of these interviews, the voices of nine participants have been included in this paper all of whom are workers, eight being local workers/guides or LMTO and one who is an international mountain guide and tour operator. Alongside these interviews daily field notes captured informal conversations, participant observation, and the day-to-day lived experience of high-altitude mountaineering; the summit preparations and meetings, workers weighing and sorting loads to go up the mountain, 2am wake-up calls to see participants off on climbing days, and so on. A daily photographic record was kept during the field work, the photographs included here serve largely as visual aids to portray working conditions on the

mountain. Figure 1 (below) was captured by the lead researcher in the Khumbu Icefall which illustrates, for example, the risks posed to local guides by inexperienced clients.

Table 1 (below) presents details of the nine participants whose voices are included in this paper and on and the lead researcher's relationships with them. For example, a group interview is included here with three Nepali guides with whom the lead researcher lived at Everest basecamp for nearly two months during the 2019 season and whom he had known since 2014. For roughly six months in the winter of 2014/15, the lead author lived in Kathmandu while working for a Canadian NGO over which time he first made contact with four of the below noted participants. Methodologically, this fieldwork was approached with a sense of 'inbetweenness'; in between multiple insider/outsider positionalities – friend/researcher, tourist/workers' advocate, etc. Within the social world of high-altitude mountaineering, many of these participants can be described [as Nepalis might say] as a *thulo manche* [a big man]; highly successful mountain tourism guides and business owners. In this way, discussions of power are not clear cut. As a white, Western male, the lead researcher is layered in and amongst multiple positionalities in relation to precarious local indigenous mountain workers, affluent local tourism entrepreneurs, mountaineering tourists, and international mountain tour operators. These positionalities can often be contradictory and require reflection and sensitivity – for example feeling a tension between not wanting to assume a white/Christian saviour complex while still feeling it necessary to make a point *on behalf of local workers* about workers' rights for the most vulnerable members of this particular tourism system. Therefore, this paper captures relations between participants who are themselves at times in opposition as they barter for power in the globally significant phenomenon that is high-altitude mountaineering tourism.

For the purposes of this paper, we employed thematic analysis as an analytical tool to topically summarize workers' thoughts and feelings in regard to their work and lives as guides on Mount Everest. Thematic analysis is valued as an analytical method for its flexibility, for how it can be applied within a wide range of conceptual frameworks, and for its theory driven analysis (Braun & Clark, 2022). As Braun and Clark (2022) note, themes are often recognized early in the research process even during or before interviews. Themes of precariousness, dignity and recognition were identified early in the analytical process – during the ethnographic fieldwork and as these issues were clearly articulated in interview settings by participants. After returning from the field, a period of re-familiarisation (Braun & Clark, 2022) occurred through the process of transcription, re-listening to recorded audio, revisiting field notes and photographs, etc. We have explicitly drawn themes out of interview material related to key issues outlined in justice and precariousness literature and the intersecting theme of workers rights in transnational tourism and coded as such.

Findings are broken into four sections which thematically discuss how precariousness and justice issues manifest in this particular form of adventure tourism. We begin by discussing precariousness (A) and aspects of representation, dignity and recognition (B). We then consider local workers' grievances in relation to the working environment and conditions of employment (C), while the final section (D) explores the 2014 avalanche on Everest which is narrated primarily from the perspective of C., an IMTO. The interview with C has been chosen to represent this event for two reasons: 1) it was the interview which explored this tragedy most comprehensively; 2) it demonstrates key themes of this paper, such as how IMTO interpret their responsibilities in regard to workers' rights and highlights issues of responsibility, advocacy and solidarity, which are key themes in justice literature.

Table 1: Interview Participants

NAME	NATIONALITY	COMPANY & ROLE	DATE & LENGTH	PARTICIPANT NOTES
P.	Nepal	**LMTO** *Part Owner, Lead Mountain Guide*	25.03.2019 35 min	One formal interview, regular and multiple informal encounters over the space of 90 days during Nepalese portion of field work in a variety of settings (Kathmandu, basecamp, tea houses, etc.) Regular contact on social media through Facebook/Instagram
DR.	Nepal	**LMTO** *Owner and basecamp manager / Nepalese entrepreneur*	29.03.019 48 min	One formal interview, multiple informal encounters during field work in Nepal
N.	Nepal	**LMTO** *Owner and International Mountain Guide*	25.03.2019 25 min	One formal interview, regular informal encounters during field work in Nepal (basecamp, Kathmandu, etc.)
PEMBA PTEMBA TENDI	Nepal Nepal Nepal	**Local Guides** *Local High-altitude porters and guides*	20.05.2019 44 min	Three workers known since 2014, one formal group interview (date provided), one separate interview for each. This group of workers shared basecamp with the lead researcher, daily interactions, participation and observation. Regular contact on social media Facebook/Instagram
A.	Pakistan	**LMTO (Pakistan)** *Owner & Basecamp Manager*	03.07.2019 39 min	Pakistani LMTO, regular encounters during six week K2 basecamp research period Known since 2014
M.	Nepal	**LMTO/IMTO** *Owner & International Mountain Guide*	03.07.2019 45 min	Encountered on multiple occasions, one formal interview at K2 basecamp.
C.	USA	**IMTO** *Owner & Lead International Mountain Guide*	04.07.2019 61 min	Encountered on multiple occasions, one formal interview at K2 basecamp First meeting in 2015

Findings: Justice Issues and precariousness in high-altitude mountaineering tourism

A) Precariousness

While local workers expressed many grievances in relation to their work on Mount Everest, we have chosen three themes which demonstrate key justice issues to explore: precariousness, issues of representation and recognition, managerial perspectives on skills, change, and voice. In terms of precariousness, N., an LMTO and IFMGA certified guide describes how he began working in the high mountains below:

> *I started working in the mountains in 1998, in the Rowaling region, as a porter. My father was also a climber. When I was like 10 years old, he passed away working on Kanchenjunga, unfortunately. After that I was the eldest of my family, I had to support my family, so I leave my school and I started to work for this tourism sector. I did not want to work in this sector after he passed away, but in our community back then, there was no choice for another job. So, I chose this way to support my family. I got a chance to work in the high mountains from my uncle to work on an Annapurna expedition in 2000. I asked him 'I want to go to the mountain because I have to give support for my brothers and sisters' and he said 'ok'.* (N., March, 2019, Kathmandu)

N's story is an extremely common one in Nepal. While mountain work has helped many escape poverty and improve their livelihoods, it has also entailed considerable suffering and trauma for workers and their remote mountain communities. However, it is something that is accepted among Nepalese mountain workers, that their choices are constrained by precariousness as DR, and Pemba describe below:

> *I have lost friends and family on the mountain, I know that I could also die ... but all those things don't stop us. My friend, other sherpa who also lost brothers, fathers, uncles, they are still going back to the mountains because they don't have a choice. After 2014 and 2015 people were wondering, will the sherpa come back ... we all went back. This is the big difference between the client and local people, they only come once, we go back, every year.* (DR., March, 2019, Kathmandu)

> *Mostly our work is always scary. But we have to do this, otherwise, nothing – no job, no profession, without doing this, there is nothing, we have to do it. Our families are always scared of the mountain. Will I go back to my family or not? This is always a question on our minds. Normally our family, they don't want money, they want us to be there, but this is our occupation, this is our profession, it is our duty, our obligation to go ... so what to do? (Pemba, EBC, May, 2019)*

Pemba, whom the first author shared basecamp with for over two months, frames his conceptualisation of his work through a sense of obligation and duty. While all workers interviewed expressed a sense of concern over the industry and the work they do, or whether their families could cope in their absence, most were quite thankful, passionate, proud and excited about the opportunities presented through mountaineering tourism. This was especially the case for more highly trained, International Federation of Mountain Guides (IFGMA) workers who had the opportunity to explore greater pay and working conditions due to that extra curricular skill set. However, many do not always feel positive about their experiences working with clients and most felt unrecognised for their efforts.

B) Representation, Dignity and Recognition

The sentiment of being underappreciated, forgotten, or as working 'in the shadows' was common among local mountain workers. The sherpa are of course 'paid for those things', as M describes below. These payments represent some of the most lucrative opportunities for mountain people in Nepal, however, workers return each season with 'mixed feelings' and do not feel recognised as equal collaborators, especially in the period *after* the mountain has been climbed when the workers are then 'forgotten', as both M. and A., describe below:

> How do you feel about Westerners saying 'I climbed Everest, it was me' without talking about workers?

> *I think there are mixed feelings. Like, they have to spend lots of money to get there. And the sherpa are paid for those things. But also, I think the sherpa are always on **the dark side, in the shadow of Everest**. The clients try to show off themselves, as if everything they did and made possible. But there are always sherpa who fix the lines, carry loads to high camps, set everything, and make the clients happy so they can focus on the summit, and later they forget those sherpas. It makes me a little sad, but again, for sherpa it's a job, they get paid for that. The client pays all those expenses and income for the sherpa, so anyways there is a mixed feeling.* (M., July, 2019, K2BC)

> *Westerners come here talking about climbing 8000m peaks, they do not say anything about the sherpa or Pakistani high porter. They say 'I did it, I am strong.' For example, I went to one presentation from a person in Spain, where they don't say anything about the sherpa, except for one time "Oh I cannot go to the summit this time because my sherpa was not able to go because he was not trained." I think it is so sad because when they got the success they say "Yeah, it was only me, I got the summit" but when there is no success the excuse was on the sherpa who was not experienced enough or didn't have good gloves or something. This is so sad. Climbers, they should give thanks for that support.* (A., July, 2019, K2BC)

For many 'clients' who are semi-professional climbers, the telling and recreating of their Everest story is where the most significant benefits of the performance are earned; through speaking engagements, presentations, media appearances, and sponsorship or endorsements. The act of retelling and shaping stories is imbued with power. Here, workers' efforts can be downplayed, ignored, or even blamed in the case of failures, creating a general sense of mistrust and frustration for local workers. Despite being 'the backbone' of Himalayan mountaineering, as another local guide put it, workers are not treated as full team members and collaborators in an ascent. Workers are merely treated as '*the help*', according to participants, as backdrops to Himalayan performances, machinery which operates in the shadows and out of view. As P. and DR. highlight below, what local workers are asking for is to be recognized as collaborators who are vital components of the team and thanked both personally and publicly for their efforts.

> *They say they climb Everest, but they never say we climbed Everest **with** the sherpa. They say I do, but they can't, not without sherpa. They should say we climb Everest **through** the sherpa, **because of** the sherpa* (P., April, 2019, Dingboche).

> *One thing I would change is awareness and education of clients. Climbing Everest helps people add value to their profile, people are using Everest to promote themselves personally, professionally, to become like motivational speakers. Sometimes I don't really feel good about this. If it wasn't for the clients the sherpa wouldn't be on the mountain, if it wasn't for the sherpa the client wouldn't be on the mountain. **Its teamwork right?** But unfortunately once they climb Everest they're like "I climbed Everest" they never say "we climbed Everest". Some don't even bother to say thank you. Last year my clients wanted to fly straight to Kathmandu when they got to basecamp*

after the summit and I refused. "You have to spend at least one night in basecamp, celebrate with the team, at least say thank you." (DR., March, 2019, Kathmandu)

The above quotations reflect feelings circulating amongst the community of local workers which describe sentiments of being unappreciated and not receiving full recognition and respect for their efforts by the international clients. As these quotations demonstrate, the monetary benefits of roughly $5000 USD for an eight to ten week 'season', though substantial in Nepal, are not enough alone to make workers feel appreciated and well reimbursed for the variety of arduous tasks they perform and risks they take as part of their jobs. The narratives presented here are widespread among Nepalese workers and are representative of how local workers view such social norms in high-altitude mountaineering tourism. Such social norms add an emotional dimension to the local workers' labour; they are often required to 'make the clients happy', yet they are burdened by emotional traumas such as the loss of friends and family, which they cannot openly discuss, and the risks presented to them by clients whose lack of preparedness is a threat to their wellbeing. All this is done while anticipating the purposefully forgetful exclusions of clients who, while omitting to mention the worker, benefit financially and socially from their heightened, almost mythological presentation, as an Everesteer. While there are many aspects which local workers would change in relation to their job, the following section describes some of their key managerial concerns.

C) The Working Environment

We begin with DR, a Nepalese LMTO and medical doctor who specialises in high-altitude medicine has worked on Mount Everest since 2011. DR outlines below that key skills are missing amongst the vast majority of workers in the high-altitude mountaineering system. Training, he highlights is a key issue, while many local workers are available to help during emergencies, due to a lack of basic medical skills, or rescue skills many are incapable of doing so. To combat this particular issue, DR. has in recent years opened a training facility in Kathmandu to teach vital medical skills to Nepalese high-altitude and outdoor adventure tourism workers.

If you could change anything on the mountain, what would it be?

*Number one would be safety. I have been involved in many big disasters, avalanches on Everest, Manaslu. I was there in 2014, there in 2015 ... **We always have lots of people who want to help but they don't have the skills.** This is why I have started doing medical training for the sherpas, because we don't have the skills on the mountain to make the mountain safer for everyone.*

Training the local workforce is something that occurs on a case-by-case basis, with some IMTO having historically invested in training, while others forgo it completely. The expectation, however, that Nepalese high-altitude workers would become trained and certified mountain guides recognised by the IFMGA, is a relatively new phenomenon. Although, by 2019 demand for the limited amount of Nepalese guides who are certified with the IFMGA was quite high with lots of competition occurring between LMTO and IMTO. This is partially due to how such trained guides are a selling point for safety-conscious clients and also for how they can assist in scenes of disaster and accidents as Ptemba, a local IFMGA guide who hails from the Rai community discusses below:

My first Everest expedition was in 2014. I was in the Khumbu Icefall ... I lost so many friends. Two of my friends, we were very close, but I was lucky, when it happened I was only 3 minutes in front of them, I had just went passed that place. There were 25-26 people standing there, now only 7-8 of them are alive. Everywhere there was people in the Icefall, we tried to make a rescue, we took

who ever we could away, who ever was alive, but we had to leave so many bodies behind. It was three years before I came back.

When the accident happened in 2014, we could not perform a proper rescue. If we have more trained people, like IFMGA, then for sure, but at that time there were not enough skilled people. This is why I decided that I want to start with my IFMGA training. (Ptemba, May, 2019, EBC)

Ptemba has difficulties expressing if what he saw in 2014 has negatively impacted him, if it had lasting effects on his mental health. What is more telling, however, is that it took Ptemba three years to return to Everest for work. Tendi, who was also present during this group interview with Pemba, Tendi and Ptemba, further highlighted what a lack of training means for local workers:

Three or four years ago many untrained people died on Everest, every year it happened. Someone will die when they remove their safety [*a safety lanyard/chord]. *Some people fall in a crevasse or down the Lhotse face. If they have proper technique, then of course this won't happen. One guy, he fell and was hanging on the rope above the crevasse, he didn't know what he was doing, like how to save himself. He was alone, hanging, so he just died there after some time.*

Generally the local workers interviewed as part of this research felt as though there was a lack of skilled individuals on the mountain. After over three decades of commercial mountaineering on Mount Everest, there is still a considerable lack of workers who have obtained the highest level of qualification offered by the IFMGA which has limited their ability to work year-round outside of Nepal as well as to gain better benefits, pay, more skilled work responsibilities/roles. While the case in Nepal is already pronounced, in other contexts such as Pakistan, there is only a small handful of trained high-altitude workers while most are stuck in menial, laborious positions. The lack of investment in local skills is poor even in the context of Nepal and this has resulted in a more dangerous working environment as well as stunted workers' upward mobility.

Figure1: A high-altitude worker hauls an inexperienced client through the Khumbu Icefall. The risks of guiding on Mount Everest become greater when clients or guides are inexperienced, as can be seen.

While safety was the number one issue that local workers were concerned with, there was also a sense of concern surrounding benefits, worker protections such as insurances, and a lack of standards and meaningful policies, as Pemba and DR describe below:

> *In Western countries you have pension, we don't have, but we would like to have some retirement when we can't work on the mountains. Or safety for our family. For example, our mountain guide friend Ashok fell recently, he is in the hospital now, maybe he can't work in the future. The government should take care of him, he should get support, his kids should get schooling. Right now we get $15,000 USD insurance if you die on Everest, its different for other mountains, but that's not enough. At least also your kids should get school and education. If I die on the mountain, that's ok, but it's only ok if my kids and my wife are taken care of.* (Pemba, May, 2019, EBC)

> *In Nepal unfortunately there are not many rules, regulations, policies. We aren't really happy about it, there's nothing, it's an open market, everyone can do what they want. I wish the government would set a standard about who actually has the capacity to manage the risky business of climbing 8000m peaks. Anybody can offer an expedition to an 8000m peak if they are registered as a trekking company and we don't look at the experience of the client, or the international operators at all. So we need to think about that.* (DR., March, 2019, Kathmandu*)*

After the disastrous 2019 Spring season, where 22 climbers and workers died throughout the Nepalese/Tibetan Himalaya, the Ministry of Tourism did finally enact new regulations such as: a minimum charge for Everest, minimum client experience levels, and limits on ages and types of disabilities which make for riskier work.

D) Privileged Bodies—the politics of risky work

> *Nepal in my mind is kinda like the Wild West. It's great that anybody can offer a commercial expedition there, but it's high consequences if you aren't prepared.* (C., July, 2019, K2BC)

Everest, when climbed via its most popular route, has three main sources of hazard; the extreme effects of altitude on the body, high-winds and storms, and the objective hazard of the notorious Khumbu Icefall (KI). 'Objective hazard' describes situations where the climbing route crosses underneath or through slopes that are unstable (i.e. prone to avalanche or threatened by falling ice). For all of these hazards, workers' bodies, among other strategies, are used to *shelter* the client. Events which occurred in the Khumbu Icefall, April 18th, 2014, illustrate the precariousness of workers' lives and bodies. That morning, workers were making one of their many supply trips through the Icefall to the higher camps, of which there are four, to fully stock with supplies for the season. On their backs were tents, oxygen cylinders, cooking stoves, kitchen utensils, tables, chairs, Pringles, bottles of Coca-Cola, the personal effects of foreign climbers, and all other types of luxuries. Success hinges upon prioritizing this logistical work, all of which is done by local mountain workers who are *exposed* to the Icefall's hazard during 10-14 through trips, as opposed to merely 4-6 trips usually made by each client.

Figure 2 & 3: the approximate line of the route through the Khumbu Icefall (left) zoomed in site of the incident (right) (author's photographs)

At approximately 06:45 local time, a sizable avalanche crashed over the Khumbu Icefall striking the main supply route. Over 20 workers were buried under the ice; 16 Nepalese workers died, three bodies of the deceased were never found. The images above show the approximate location of where the avalanche struck the Khumbu Icefall. C., an IMTO who was present that day, describes their memories of the event below:

> *I spent that afternoon and the next day up there trying to dig some of our guys out of the ice. Three sherpas from our team were killed, and five others whom I knew from years past. The 19th we went back up, a small group of volunteers, to recover the remaining bodies that were possible to recover with some helicopter support to fly the corpses off from the football field, about halfway up the Icefall. We felt like we did everything we could for the guys that had died, and for their families. Unfortunately, three out of the 16 we never found.*

> *The next morning* [April 20th] *I noticed things shift, from just trying to process the situation, to individuals thinking outside the box and wanting to influence the turn of events. It really surprised me. That day, someone came over and said 'hey, I need to talk to you.' I walked over to their camp and they said 'you need to cancel the expedition.' ... 'what are you talking about?' ... 'you need to tell everybody that it's cancelled, we're going home, it's over, it's not right to stay here after what's happened.'*

> *I was really put off by that...*

Despite a horrific day, digging 'our guys' out of the ice, C remained open to the idea of carrying on with the season. Risk management protocols in the adventure tourism industry would normally follow a schedule of debriefing to learn from the event; collecting statements from present individuals, keeping a detailed record which would be stored in the company's risk management documentation. It does not appear as though any consultation with the remaining workers from this team was completed. Little consideration seems to be given to the possibility of emotional and psychological trauma or grief of workers who may have, for example, lost a close friend or brother. C continues on with the rest of the day's events below:

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*Later on that day a group of sherpa invited me for a meeting. There were two non-sherpa at the meeting, probably about 20 sherpa. It was all in Nepalese, but finally they explained 'hey, this is what we're doing, we are going to ask for these 13 demands from our government.' They wanted a piece of the $10,000 royalty fee and higher limits on their life insurance. At the time, their life insurance was worth about $400. So, they wanted higher compensation in a variety of forms, and they were basically saying, if we don't get this, the season is over. They wanted me to sign this document in support. And I said **'I gotta leave, I'm not signing anything, this isn't my country, thanks for considering me, but, I gotta get back to my camp!'***

So, I thought, this is just weird, maybe they were scared, maybe they did feel like they were due more compensation from their government. I just felt like it wasn't my place to be involved and to comment…

(C., July, 2019, K2BC)

According to C, in 2014 the life of a high-altitude worker was insured for merely $400 USD. C's reluctance to sign the document is likely not out of fear for their own personal safety, but arguably arises from an unwillingness to take a stand for workers' rights against the Ministry of Tourism, the entity which approves high-altitude mountaineering permits. C's 'not my country' attitude effectively works to eschew responsibility for issues occurring on Everest such as rubbish or safety. It's just *not* their place to be involved and comment. Without the support of IMTO, however, workers were in a much weaker position. To try to garner support, signals were sent, as C continues below:

Later on, I was at [X] camp in the guides' tent. They were getting ready for the next move. There were threats 'if you continue, we're gonna burn your house down' … but everyone figured they were empty threats. Then one of the guides came in saying 'all of our electrical wires have been cut … someone snipped them!' At that moment, everything changed, as soon as [X company] realized that someone had snipped their wires, as a message, they announced they were cancelling their expedition out of respect for the sherpa who had died in the icefall. And then it was a domino effect. Everybody else cancelled within a day or two, because, for whatever reason, they just didn't feel comfortable sticking around.

It was not out of respect and solidarity that the season was cancelled, but rather out of a feeling of discomfort that privileged bodies felt in 'sticking around'. The cross-border context in the narratives explored above is evident and results in an unwillingness to take political action to support local workers. According to C, the season was cancelled to respect the deceased and *not* the living, for whom concern is withheld. That violent 'signals' needed to be sent suggests that local workers were frustrated by lack of support. However, it took an IMTO to *decide* that the risks were too great and endorse the closure. For privileged bodies, the risks are far less great, yet those very bodies have the ability to define the risks presented to local workers for whom they have the apparent mandate to make decisions. After IMTO pulled out of the season, workers achieved a rise in their life-insurance limits to $15,000 USD. This improvement was monumental, a rare illustration of the potential for precarious workers to have a voice to change their position, but was achieved with very little support from the wider international tourism sector.

Discussion

The contours of the global tourism industry in the neoliberal era expose workers to multiple intersecting pressures that amplify precarity, including deregulation, unhealthy conditions, fierce competition and lack of bargaining power (Lee, Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015). In these contexts, exploitation of labour is a fundamental part of tourism, with poor and vulnerable communities most exposed (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). As Beck notes, fear and risks are "socially constructed phenomena, in which some people have a

greater capacity to define risks than others" (Beck, 2006, p. 333). What is on display in the examples presented in this paper is an ethnocentrism that does not view the body of a local worker, or the trauma and vulnerability experienced by their families, as on par with any potential suffering that could be experienced by clients or foreigners, illustrating the ways in which enduring racialized indifference to the suffering of precarious and unprivileged 'Others' is socially internalized by elites. The events explored in this article show how, from the purview of a body privileged by the shelter of another's, one could easily deduce that continuing on with the season is a legitimate choice. "I was really put off by that" C stated when asked to cancel the season, frustrated by having their own choices pressured and constrained, yet the power they have to constrain the choices of others, workers, and how this feels for those individuals, is not considered. Workers are thus excluded from making decisions about their own bodies, a troubling illustration of how a lack of procedural justice (Jamal & Camargo, 2014) can do incredible harm to local workers. To be heard, workers were required to send violent 'signals' to more powerful actors to gather support. The example of local workers' emotional labour and lack of distributive justice demonstrates how imagined worlds and constructs, such as high-altitude mountaineering, "have consequences for how we function together materially" (Stinson, Grimwood, & Caton, 2021, p. 237).

Jamal and Camargo (2014) describe in their Just Destination framework that marginalized voices need to be heard in order to have sustainable tourism. In situations where local workers lack a safe space (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2021) to express their concerns proactively to more powerful groups about gaps in technical capabilities or skills related deficiencies, safety issues, or working conditions, there is an increased risk of exploitation, feelings of injustice and unfairness, or even tragedy. A lack of technical mountain skills such as emergency first-aid, or mountain rescue, based on the above narratives, has clearly resulted in situations leading to the deaths of local workers. However, as this example demonstrates, challenges of transborder justice, such as those found in cross border forms of employment, require political advocacy and solidarity, a sense of interdependence, and participation in democratic processes by all actors in a system (Young, 2000). Political responsibility, however, is not often practiced by prominent actors in a network or industry which advantageously profits from systematic injustices. The mountaineering tourism industry in Nepal is demonstrative of how precariousness is advantageous for the global adventure tourism industry.

What is equally as dangerous, however, as this paper has shown, are situations where the parties who are reluctant to negotiate are the ones who have power yet refuse to act, collaborate, or show concern for the most vulnerable members of the tourism system. This situation highlights how "commodification and de-politicization has increasingly sabotaged the potential of tourism to facilitate political praxis" (Guia, 2021, p. 504). While IMTO had the opportunity to participate politically in this event, showing responsibility, solidarity and advocacy for workers' rights and well being - three crucial justice parameters according to Guia (2021) - they ultimately avoided supporting local workers due to their own commercial interests and concerns. Their 'this isn't my country' narrative aligns with the neoliberal conception of responsibility which has, through its careless, exploitative and extractive processes, manifested unsustainable forms of tourism the world over (Guia, 2021). It also further demonstrates how the cross-border context challenges Guia's three critical justice parameters.

The workers' narratives explored in this paper can be summarized as a desire for better and safer working conditions, more investment into their own skills and well-being as well as those of their peers, more recognition from clients for their contributions, benefits and guarantees for their families, more comprehensive insurances for accidental deaths and injuries, retirement benefits, guarantees for their families should the worst happen, and finally meaningful policies to be enacted by the regulator or political advocacy/participation by IMTO in policy decisions – in short, their desire for decent work. However, precarisation is an accelerating global trend, exposing more workers to the deleterious effects of instability, insecurity, risk and disenfranchisement (Kalleberg, 2009). Opportunities for resistance to these effects are constrained by the very forces that entrench precarity, disempowering workers and reducing their abilities to cooperate and collectively advocate for improved conditions. The fragmentation of the tourism industry

further reduces possibilities for collective action. Nonetheless, the collective action of mountain workers in response to the 2014 disaster demonstrates what Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) identify as the most promising route to social justice: the exercise of precarious workers' voice. This example illustrates that even the most precarious workers can, in certain circumstances, work together to exercise their voice to challenge and change the conditions under which they labour; there is potential for precarious tourism workers to organise together and exercise collective voice to bring about social change and improve their working conditions (Basnyat, 2018; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). However, although the actions of the mountain workers following the 2014 disaster are promising in terms of the potential for workers exercising their voice, there are clearly limits to the effects of this collective action in the context of the profit-driven, apolitical, and extractive global neoliberal tourism industry. Clearly, not all tourism workers have the same bargaining power and indeed one of the key impediments to collective action is often the ineffectiveness of withholding labour power, which can be easily substituted in many contexts due to the low-skilled nature of many tourism roles. However, even in these conditions, some form of collective organization is still possible and this represents the "most promising response to precarious work from the point of view of generating social change" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018: 21).

Conclusion

The article examines a growing global crisis, that of precarious work, and contributes to understanding the ways in which work is a fundamental, if often overlooked, aspect of sustainable tourism, and thus a key arena for efforts to improve social justice, in four ways. First, we illustrate how the growing precariousness of work in the global tourism industry creates conditions of instability and insecurity in which the most vulnerable are particularly exposed to exploitation and harm. Local mountain workers have long provided the physical labour necessary for high altitude mountaineering tourism in the Himalaya, yet their contribution has often been rendered invisible, undervalued and lacking dignity (Camargo & Vazquez-Maguirre, 2021). This contributes to creating the conditions under which some bodies - the precarious mountain worker's body in this case - are deemed expendable and not worthy of the same considerations given to privileged bodies. These conditions cannot lead to 'decent work' and so undermine one of the core aspects of sustainable development and justice in and through tourism. There can be no sustainable tourism without decent work for all, and so this remains a key area where the tourism industry needs to address its shortcomings and improve. Though precariousness is a growing phenomenon for workers the world over, the context explored here specifically discusses the precarity experienced by rural, ethnic, Indigenous minorities, whose historical, political and social marginalization has funneled them towards risky tourism labour. When examined through the strains of crises, the lack of care, duty, solidarity, and responsibility that many actors have shown towards the most vulnerable members of their community is clear. This falls short of what tourism scholars have called for in regard to more just forms of globalization (Higgins-Desboilles, 2008) or justice *through* political responsibility, activism and action in tourism (Guia, 2021).

Second, we have explored how privileged bodies have the ability to define risks for precarious workers, a lasting privilege and power inherited from the colonial era of mountaineering. Here, we have critically examined dynamics of power and privilege paying attention to how they are 'woven' into social-ecological worlds in places of travel and tourism (Jamal & Higham, 2021). Addressing worker vulnerability and precarious livelihoods is central to any efforts towards decolonizing tourism (Grimwood, Stinson & King, 2019). We argue that sustainable tourism is not achievable without confronting and counteracting the historical yet lasting violences of colonialism which still provide frameworks for how racialized bodies meet and make contact in international tourism. Considering the heritage aspects of high-altitude mountaineering tourism, as a historical colonial exploit, it is crucial to revisit social histories which still play out in and through tourism and heritage (Fortenberry, 2021). As seen here, the local workers still, one hundred years into mountaineering on Everest, struggle to achieve the dignity, recognition and respect they

deserve. As Honneth notes "the experience of social injustice is always measured in terms of the with-holding of some recognition held to be legitimate" (2004, p. 352). In this way, full recognition of workers' contributions to aiding and assisting tourists or international mountain guides in their efforts is a precondition of social justice in this particular context. This fundamentally draws into the frame issues of restorative justice for Indigenous peoples (Camargo & Vazquez-Maguirre, 2021) as well as advocacy inspired approaches to developing more just forms of tourism, such as augmenting and making central subaltern experiences of colonial heritages such as high-altitude mountaineering tourism (Guia, 2021).

Third, we argue that, despite the seemingly insurmountable pressures of globalisation, marketisation and commodification that are shaping the tourism industry, there remains possibility for precarious workers to unite and challenge some of the most pernicious and harmful aspects of tourism work. The example of the collective actions of the mountain workers on Everest illustrates that precarious workers can, in some circumstances, unite to exercise their voice and bring about change. Although the tourism industry is highly fragmented, geographically dispersed and has weak collective organisation (Bianchi & de Man, 2021), worker voice remains one of the most promising mechanisms through which tourism work can be remodeled to the benefit of even the most precarious workers (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). However, the possibilities for social justice and improved working conditions are hampered by a lack of solidarity from other actors in the sector, in this case international tour operators and tourists themselves. Underpinning this situation is the cross-border context which enables unsustainable, utilitarian ethics in tourism (Guia, 2021) given the lack of legal pressures to reform poor working practices.

Finally, we argue that real change and justice will only occur through solidarity and collective action from *all* actors within the global tourism industry, acting together to amplify the voices of precarious workers and demand change. High-altitude mountaineering tourism in the Greater Himalaya has provided an extreme case through which to explore these themes as it poignantly demonstrates, in part through its tragedies, the complexities around justice and fairness as they relate to work, workers and livelihoods in global tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the precarity of many workers' positions but may also offer an opportunity to reimagine tourism in less exploitative and restrictive ways (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). A crucial part of this must be to revisit what is meant by 'decent work' in tourism, particularly (but not only) in relation to vulnerable communities in the Global South, in order to collaborate in the overall project of realizing more just, equitable, and sustainable tourism futures.

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