Digital Challenges in the Social Economy: Gender-Egalitarian Practices & FLOSS

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***Abstract**. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital revolution, particularly with the rise of the platform economy. The social economy sector is also impacted by this phenomenon and holds potential to foster pro-social digitalization models. This article investigates the adoption of platform business models within the social economy, focusing on professionalization, integration of Gender-Egalitarian Practices, and the embrace of open knowledge and software. The study analyzes twenty-seven social economy entities in Barcelona, using data from an online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, web observation, and follow-up notes. Findings reveal challenges in digital platform model adoption, including limited evaluation of impact and organizational models that inadequately integrate gender perspectives. Additionally, obstacles exist in adopting Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) tools.*

***Keywords.** Social Economy; Digitalization; Platformisation; Gender-Egalitarian Practices; FLOSS*

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the growth of platform-mediated work (Directorate-General for Communications Networks et al., 2021; ILO, 2021), driven by technological advancements and impacting various economic sectors, with diverse models and implications (Scholz, 2016; Srnicek, 2016; Poell et al., 2019). The pandemic also underscored digital inequalities (Allmann, 2020; Czymara et al., 2021), including gender-based violence in digital contexts (EIGE, 2022; Vergés Bosch & Gil-Juarez, 2021).

Focusing on social economy projects in Barcelona, this article analyzes how social organizations, grounded in democratic values and practices (Garcia Jane, 2017; Laville, 2016; Scholz, 2016), are responding to the digital revolution, particularly within the platform economy (Benkler, 2006; Codagnone, 2022; Parker et al., 2018). It discusses how these social enterprises, aligned with European Commission objectives (2021), address challenges related to equality (EIGE, 2021; UN Women, 2020; UNFPA, 2020) and promote pro-social models of digitalization. This includes prioritizing gender-equalitarian practices (EIGE: What Is Gender Mainstreaming, 2023) and adopting Open Knowledge and Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) (Perry & Fitzgerald, 2006) as alternatives to extractive platforms (Srnicek, 2016). In Catalonia, for instance, 96% of social organizations recognize the imperative of digital transformation (M4social, 2022).

The social economy is characterized by small-sized entities (Sanchis Palacio & Campos Climent, 2007), contributing to lower levels of digital training. Moreover, the challenge of accessing external financial resources constrains their capacity for investment and growth (Caralt et al., 2017; M4social, 2022; Sanchis Palacio & Campos Climent, 2007), heightening reliance on public funding (Fuster Morell & Espelt, 2019).

Exploring the impact of digital business (Consejo Económico y Social de España, 2021; Harris & Rea, 2009; Kane, 2017; Nisar et al., 2019; Parveen et al., 2016) and the influence of factors such as managerial knowledge, training, and skills on ICT adoption is crucial. These elements are recognized

as significant barriers to implementing ICT and e-business solutions in small organizations (Arendt, 2008).

2 Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to examine whether social organizations are genuinely promoting gender-equalitarian practices in the digitalization process and adopting of Open Knowledge and Free and Open Source Software (FLOSS) to establish a democratic infrastructure that fosters accountability, transparency, and knowledge accessibility.

3 Methodology

This study examines twenty-seven social economy organizations in Barcelona, selected from participants in the 2021 MatchImpulsa feminist digital acceleration program under the Barcelona UOC Chair in Digital Economy, supported by the Barcelona City Council, Barcelona Activa, and the Open University of Catalonia. The selection ensured diverse representation of organizations aligned with social and solidarity economy values, including non-profit status, varied governance models, and different levels of feminist practices and digitalization (Bases de la llei d'economia social i solidària de Catalunya, 2020). The analysis of nine gender-egalitarian practices is based on Equitest, an equality self-assessment tool used by the Barcelona City Council.

Data collection methods included an online form (from May to December 2021), which gathered general information on the organizations. Semi-structured interviews conducted with project leaders in November and December 2021 covered governance, business models, gender equality, inter-cooperation, digital strategy, knowledge policies, and impacts of COVID-19. Website and social media analyses were conducted throughout 2021, and participant observation (from June to December 2021) provided insights into the practices and challenges faced during their platformization efforts.

4 Results

The analysis of twenty-seven social economy initiatives in Barcelona reveals a diverse and representative sample. Notably, twenty-two initiatives are led by organizations with less than ten years of experience, encompassing nine of the ten sectors outlined in the Barcelona 2030 Social and Solidarity Economy Strategy. In terms of business models, twelve organizations operate hybrid Business-to-Business (B2B) and Business-to-Consumer (B2C) models, while six focus exclusively on B2C and three on B2B. Public administration serves as the primary source of funding, with twenty-one projects relying heavily on subsidies or public assistance. Budgets for digitalization vary significantly; only one project allocates €50,000 to €70,000, while most do not exceed €15,000.

Regarding financial performance metrics, only ten of the twenty-one organizations analyzed are tracking them, with four focusing solely on cash flow. This limited use of financial metrics contrasts with the overarching goal of increasing sales and revenue, posing a key challenge for medium-term platformization efforts. The level of professionalization among social economy entities is limited, as only eight out of seventeen organizations have dedicated digital strategy professionals. Consequently, eight organizations prioritize 'strengthening the workforce' as the second most critical need for advancing platformization in the medium term.

4.1 Gender-Egalitarian Practices

Of the twenty-seven organizations transitioning to digital platform models, twenty-two (81.48%) focus on vulnerable groups and/or feminism, and fifteen (55.56%) incorporate gender equality into their strategic plans. Eleven projects are led by women or emphasize feminist practices. Continuing with the analysis of financial metrics implementation, only one-fourth of the organizations align with those led by women or oriented towards feminist practices.

The analysis of nine gender-egalitarian practices reveals: (1) Sixteen out of twenty-seven projects collect Workforce Data Segregated by Gender; (2) Seventeen out of twenty-seven projects adopt gender-neutral and non-sexist communication; (3) Seventeen out of twenty-seven projects ensure equal access to all workplaces regardless of gender; (4) Eleven out of twenty-seven projects have protocols to prevent discrimination during hiring; (5) Eleven out of twenty-seven projects have measures to combat sexual harassment; (6) Seven out of twenty-seven projects focus on equitable distribution of permanent contracts; (7) Twelve out of twenty-seven projects provide equal access to training programs for internal promotion; (8) Eighteen out of twenty-seven projects implement additional flexible work time arrangements beyond legal requirements; (9) Fifteen out of twenty-seven projects integrate gender equality into their strategic planning. This analysis underscores the varying levels of implementation of standard gender-equality measures across different projects.

4.2 Open Knowledge and adopting FLOSS Tools

Regarding Open Knowledge and the adoption of FLOSS tools, sixteen projects are actively implementing open-source software tools, and nine are developing technology using open-source code. In terms of licensing, half of the projects indicate the use of public domain licenses, while two projects express a need for guidance in this area.

The adoption of common-use resources, open-source code, and/or content aligns with the commons approach that social economy organizations are integrating into their digital strategies. Seven out of twenty-one organizations prioritize implementing open technology, preferably FLOSS or decentralized open technology, while another seven emphasize their commitment to open knowledge, including open licenses, free content, and open data. Additionally, twenty out of the twenty-seven analyzed projects (74.02%) are generating common-use resources such as reports, articles, infographics, maps, video conferences, and graphic materials.

5 Conclusions

This study addresses the primary challenges of digitalization in social economy organizations and proposes future research directions, including the integration of a gender perspective (EIGE, 2021; EIGE, 2023). Social economy organizations transitioning to digital platforms predominantly adopt hybrid B2B and B2C models, relying heavily on public funds (Fuster Morell & Espelt, 2019). The implementation of gender-egalitarian measures underscores challenges in achieving gender equality (EIGE, 2021; UN Women, 2020; UNFPA, 2020), emphasizing the need to integrate a gender perspective more effectively into digitalization efforts.

While many organizations are implementing gender-egalitarian practices aligned with feminist values, limitations persist, such as the non-implementation of indefinite contracts. Future research should explore strategies for mainstreaming feminist digitalization, including promoting intensive feminist projects within new platform business models (EIGE: What Is Gender Mainstreaming, 2023). Additionally, examining how public policies can foster digitalization with a feminist perspective will be crucial (Codagnone, 2022).

Regarding open software and knowledge, this study confirms previous findings on the limited adoption of FLOSS tools in social organizations (XES, 2021; M4social, 2022). However, half of the organizations in the sample use public domain licenses and are open to sharing resources openly. Future research should investigate how social economy organizations can advocate more actively for widespread FLOSS adoption, particularly considering tools reintroduced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The persistent lack of dedicated digital professionals remains a significant weakness in digitalization efforts within social economy projects (M4social, 2022), impacting digital impact evaluation and strategy implementation (Caralt et al., 2017). This deficiency also affects strategic management (Sanchis Palacio & Campos Climent, 2007; M4social, 2022), hindering comprehensive analysis of digital business strategies (Consejo Económico y Social de España, 2021; Harris & Rea, 2009; Kane, 2017; Nisar et al., 2019). Future research should explore whether there is a relationship between the workforce in social

organizations, public investment, and the implementation of impact indicators that aid strategic management during the transition to a digital business model.

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