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Amplifying workers' voices through technology to uncover modern slavery

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Piya is a Thai worker who used to be employed at a processing factory in a Southeast Asian country. While conducting research on the potential for technology to increase trafficking victims' identification, we had the opportunity to interview her.[1]

She shared that she worked in the factory for six years doing more than four hours of overtime a day, but she never received compensation for it. She did not know what to do. She was worried that if she had stopped working overtime, she would lose her job. Every time someone was inspecting the factory, she was too afraid to speak out. Her employer had instructed her to lie about her working conditions and would always stay close to the interview area to listen to what she said.

"Workers were too afraid to talk, but they all needed help," she told us.

Stories like Piya's are not isolated. The number of victims of modern slavery in private economies is estimated to be 16 million.[2] This includes vulnerable workers exploited in global supply chains worldwide.

For companies sourcing globally, social compliance auditing is one of the key approaches to examining working conditions within their supply chains. In fact, social auditing is estimated to be worth USD 50 billion a year, with sources suggesting that companies devote up to 80% of their ethical sourcing budget to ethics auditing alone.[3]

Within these audits, workers' interviews are usually a critical component that provides the voice of the employee on working conditions. Conducting them helps determine whether exploitation exists in the workplace, highlights areas for further examination by an auditor and provides credible firsthand information.

A recent study conducted by the United Nations University Institute in Macau in collaboration with The Mekong Club, a Hong Kong–based nongovernmental organization (NGO) fighting modern slavery in Asia, surveyed more than 200 auditors working in 16 Asian countries and unveiled flaws in interview methods. The most common flaws are time constraints during factory visits, the lack of privacy during interviews, workers appearing to be coached and not feeling safe enough to speak out, communication and language barriers, and a lack of consistent worker voice analysis methods. These issues result in an overall lack of frequency, privacy, confidentiality and consistency in workers' interviews during social compliance audits.[4] This results in victims—and exploitative factories—remaining unnoticed.

Failing victims by not identifying them is one of the root causes of modern slavery that still thrives today. The importance of victim identification is highlighted by the U.S. Department of State, which says that the proactive identification of victims "and training for first responders are of paramount importance to a government's

ability to combat human trafficking."[5] However, The Mekong Club compared the number of people in modern slavery and trafficking with the number of people identified by the U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons reports in recent years, and determined that less than 1% of the victims is identified and helped every year.[6]

Can technology offer a solution to this challenge?

In recent years, a variety of digital reporting tools for workers ("worker voice" tools) have appeared across supply chains, allowing workers to report on labor conditions through technology and to fulfill the role of traditional grievance channels.

These tools are designed to obtain information directly from workers. From recent research conducted by Tech Against Trafficking, a collaborative effort to support the eradication of human trafficking, that performed landscape mapping of more than 200 anti-trafficking tools,[7] including 102 tools focused on victim identification, we identified the digital worker reporting tools that were available or already used for business due diligence. They were reviewed against the categories that we feel are paramount to ensuring a successful identification of victims of labor exploitation: privacy, frequency, inclusivity and consistency.

Most analyzed tools are mobile apps and, generally, have consistent data collection and storage methods. However, it is unclear whether they can be representative of a diverse workforce, or whether they will allow for further investigation of reported issues to ultimately help workers leave an exploitative situation. (Comparisons were made with information provided by West Principles, Open Society Foundation, the Issara Institute, and our own research.)

Moreover, the use of these tools needs to be initiated by the workers. In countries where there is low internet penetration, access to such channels remains difficult. Also, during an expert focus group, one company representative noted that "it is a challenge to get workers to download multiple apps."[8]

These findings show that there is an unaddressed need for technology solutions that offer workers an inclusive channel to share grievances through an in-person intermediary. Such design ensures that workers can only request help when there is someone with them who has access to channels to support them.

In the case of social audits, technology can be used by auditors to approach and interview workers through preloaded questionnaires, collecting grievances that can be analyzed in real time *while still at the factory*, to inform their follow-up. To keep the interviews inclusive, this platform must be available in multiple languages and dialects. For example, in the seafood industry in Thailand, where the majority of workers come from Myanmar, we were told by NGO workers that including dialects, such as Mon and Shan, was as important as having the official language (Burmese) available.

We considered this feedback when collaborating on our own app, which has been tested by major corporations working in the garment sector in a number of countries in Southeast Asia.

Workers' privacy and safety remain critical. In our case, when testing the app, we provided the workers with a pair of headphones to prevent any audio from being overheard and made sure that an introductory message made workers aware that the audit was entirely anonymous and that they had no obligation to complete it.

When we showed Piya how this app worked, she said she wished labor inspectors could have used it when visiting factories like the one she worked at so that nobody from the company's management could've heard her answers or tracked the answers back to her. Other workers who were approached to test the app said they felt more comfortable using technology when answering sensitive questions. A number of migrant workers said that

responding to the app questionnaire was their first ever audit. They had never been selected for one before, seemingly because <u>no one from the audit teams visiting the factory spoke their language</u>.[9]

A means to enhance workers' agency

Our research findings highlight the value of inclusive screening, both in the literacy rates and languages spoken by the target audience. Technology is not a silver bullet for ending modern slavery and human trafficking, but it is a means to enhance workers' agency and allow for safe and accurate disclosure of their working conditions.

This technology must be developed and implemented with caution, with preassessments of existing capacity and respect for current ecologies of communication among the communities where it is implemented.

Takeaways

- Digital technology can address current challenges in worker interview methods and help amplify workers' voices.

- Social auditors should proactively screen workers in an inclusive, consistent and safe way, thereby increasing chances to uncover labor exploitation.

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