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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.

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