



JOURNAL of MODERN SLAVERY

A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Human Trafficking Solutions

COVID-19 SUPPLEMENTAL ISSUE

Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020

ABSTRACT

**Pivoting technology:
understanding working conditions
in the time of COVID-19**

Hannah Thinyane

Michael Gallo

United Nations University, Institute in Macao

Pivoting technology: understanding working conditions in the time of COVID-19

Hannah Thinyane
Michael Gallo

United Nations University, Institute in Macao

The new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that has swept across the world is not just a health crisis, but also gravely threatens the livelihoods and economic well-being of millions. While the effects of the pandemic are being felt across all areas of society, it is yet another factor that drives those already in low paid and informal work situations towards employment with higher risks of exploitation.¹ The rapidly changing dynamics of COVID-19 are exacerbating such precarious forms of employment and therefore it is a significant priority to understand how working conditions are being resultantly affected.

Our work recognizes the critical role that private sector can play in fighting labour exploitation and forced labour within their own supply chains. Over the past four years, we have been working with civil society, auditors, corporate social responsibility experts, and private sector representatives to understand the role that technology can play to support them.² Worker interviews have always been notoriously difficult, with communication, training and trust barriers impacting the traditional face-to-face interviews that occur. Through our engagement, we have co-developed and released Apprise Audit, an innovative solution used by multinational corporations as part of the worker interview process in social compliance auditing to detect exploitation and forced labour in their supply chains. Apprise Audit is a multi-language mobile app that an auditor downloads onto their phone and then uses to interview workers through an audio questionnaire. After completing interviews, the app summarises findings, highlighting indicators of

¹ Urmila Bhoola, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Including Its Causes and Consequences” (Human Rights Council: United Nations, 9-27 September)

² Sassetti, Francisca, Mera, Silvia and Thinyane, Hannah (2019). Apprise Audit Impact Assessment: Detecting labour exploitation in supply chains. United Nations University. <https://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:7548>

vulnerability that were identified in any of the interviews, to inform auditors on-site inspections.

Apprise Audit has been actively used in factories across several countries in Southeast Asia by four multinational corporations within the garment and footwear sectors for over one year. In early 2020 and in response to growing awareness of the impact that COVID-19 would have on the practice of social compliance audits, these corporations formed a working group, aimed at understanding how Apprise Audit could be adapted to help them understand current conditions within factories. Firstly, auditors that did not face travel restrictions requested support to gather data on factories' response to COVID-19. For auditors who were unable to travel due to movement restrictions, they sought a way to still gather information from workers while they were unable to undertake in-person interviews. In response to the first request, we extended the question list to include new questions specifically targeted towards understanding current conditions in factories related to COVID-19 measures. In response to the latter, we extended the functionality of Apprise Audit, to enable self-reporting direct worker feedback as a data collection method. Using this method, a brand sends a QR code (with instructions for use in the form of a text-free comic, and a URL) to each factory to be included in inspections. Factory staff are required to post the printed sheet in a surveillance-free environment, where workers have direct access to their personal mobile devices. Workers then scan the QR code (or enter the link provided on the page) and navigate directly to a web-based frontend to the Apprise Audit questioning system. This allows workers to undertake the interview themselves, on their own mobile device, and uploads responses to the brand's existing Apprise Audit account.

Based on stakeholder consultation and extensive field research, Apprise Audit's original functionality was intentionally designed to not allow for worker-initiated direct feedback because of certain limitations this approach has. If a digital reporting tool is not being administered by a trusted or external third-party actor (i.e. the auditor), vulnerable workers may be subject to coercion by factory management to misrepresent working conditions through self-reporting as being compliant with labour standards, when in reality exploitation is occurring. Workers also might not own a mobile device or have access to one to be able self-report feedback, making the auditor a crucial intermediary in soliciting trustworthy and representative responses. However, because of the circumstances brought about by COVID-19, we decided to investigate what role this modality could play in allowing private sector partners to understand what is happening on the ground.

Between now and the full submission in April 2021 (if invited) we will be working with our private sector partners to understand the implications and effectiveness of these two new COVID-19-specific features of Apprise Audit. We further aim to understand how companies' longer-term social auditing strategies have been adversely impacted by COVID-19. We will ask open-ended questions in virtual interviews to facilitate an in-depth discussion of challenges and findings unique to each individual stakeholder and also distribute an online survey with a standardized set of questions. These findings will be compiled into a series of case studies for thematic analysis. We will draw on the findings of this impact assessment on the use of these two new features to provide practice-oriented recommendations that aim to support multinational corporations to understand the conditions of work within factories in their supply chain in the times of COVID-19 and beyond. This discussion will also be framed in an overarching context that weighs the pros and cons of worker self-reporting vs auditor administered. This can help inform relevant policy recommendations to stakeholders and provide useful insights to the target audiences of the *Journal of Modern Slavery*.

Timetable for research

- Rollout of new question list and data collection strategy from August 15
- Ongoing discussions and problem solving with brands August - November
- Virtual interviews & survey distribution: November - December 2020
- Analysis and publication drafting January –March 2021