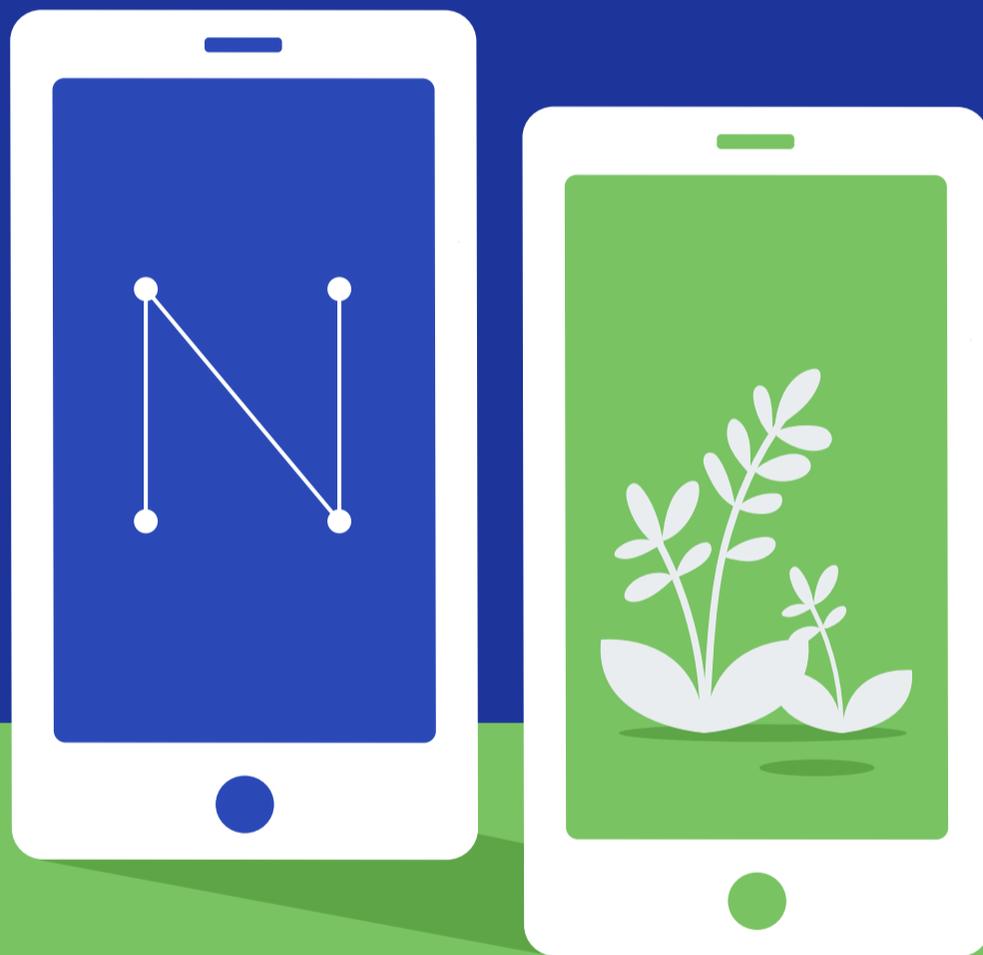


# NONECHKA



Using mobile technology  
to connect with agricultural  
workers in Mexico

 **Polaris**

# 01.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Nonechka means “close to me/you” in Nahuatl, one of the prevalent indigenous languages spoken by Mexico’s migrant agricultural laborers where the project was implemented. The project is so named because it was designed to connect directly with these often isolated workers.

The goals were two-fold: to collect data directly from workers about their experiences and the dynamics of exploitation within the Mexican-U.S. agricultural sector to help inform evidence-based advocacy efforts for prevention purposes, and to hone the communications tools and strategies to connect isolated migrant workers with crucial networks of support and information.

Polaris launched Nonechka first in Mexico because data from the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline shows that Mexico is one of the primary source countries for victims of labor trafficking and exploitation in the United States. The conditions that lead to this victimization do not start and end when the worker crosses the border. The problem — and the solutions — must be transnational.

To respond to survivors from this transnational perspective, since 2015

Polaris has partnered with organizations in Mexico and provided training and technical assistance to the línea y chat nacional contra la trata de personas (LNCTdP) — the national human trafficking hotline in Mexico. Additionally, to inform data-based prevention strategies, Polaris has been working with partners on the ground in Mexico to collect data about the conditions that lead to trafficking of farmworkers and the ways in which labor exploitation and trafficking are unfortunately normalized in some industries in Mexico.

Polaris partnered with Ulula, a technology provider specializing in worker engagement tools, to reduce risk of human rights violations and other abuses in supply chains. Together with allied organizations working on the ground in Mexico, Polaris used the bespoke platform to survey and communicate with workers in real time.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced major adjustments to the original plan around outreach and survey participation. In-person and group meetings became radio ads, social media campaigns, flyers, and car megaphone announcements. Survey participation rates were likely lower than they would have been under normal circumstances. →

Partner organizations also observed other impacts of the pandemic such as: a change in the migration dynamics of agricultural workers, prevention of the migration of families, confusion about access to government services to support labor mobility, as well as high levels of misinformation regarding the prevention of COVID-19 and vaccination options.

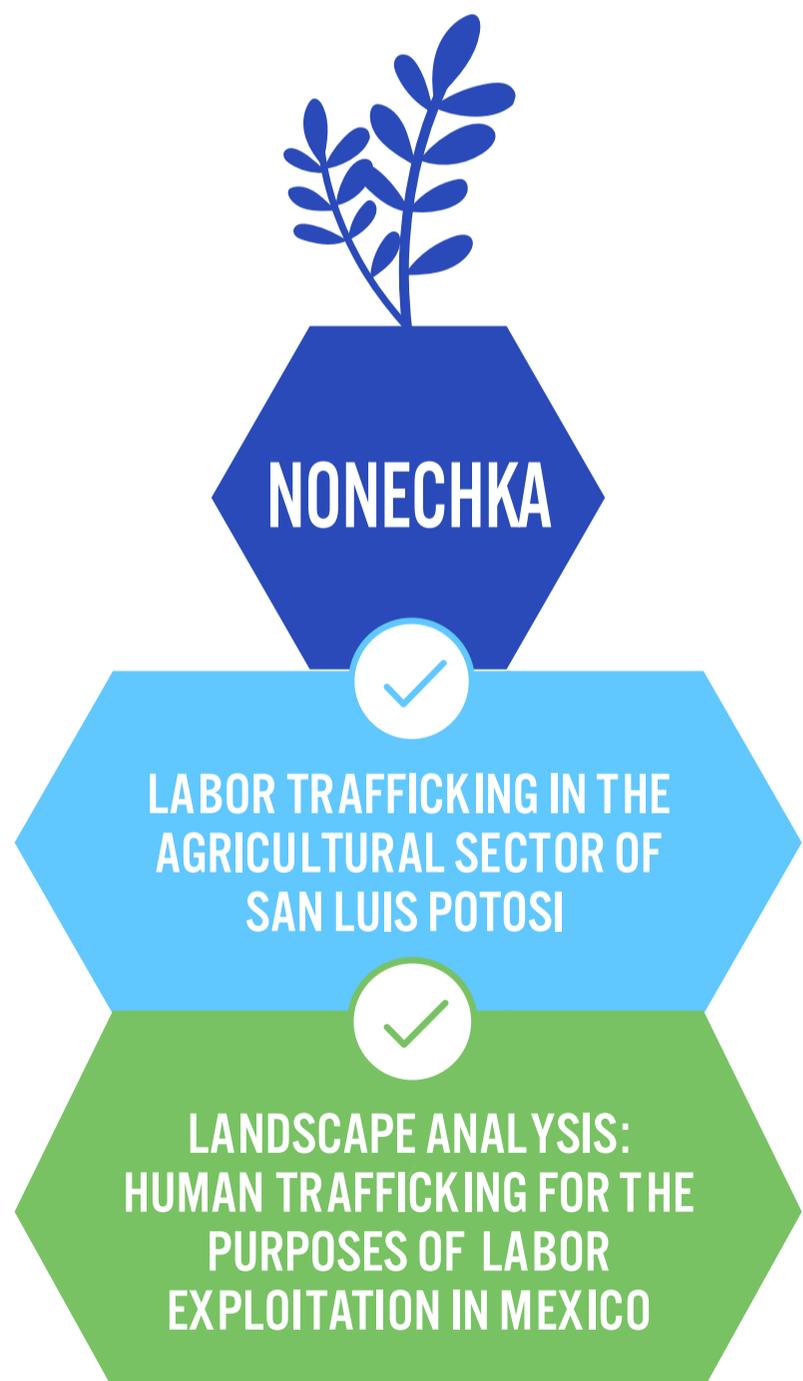
Despite these challenges, the Nonechka project in Mexico resulted in a database with information from more than 2,770 agricultural workers. A total of 695 participants provided responses to a survey on vulnerabilities and risk factors for human trafficking and forced labor in the agricultural sector, which will contribute to the work of identifying measures to prevent and eradicate this crime.

Both analysis of that data and the iterative process of building out the system of communication resulted in crucial insights and important steps toward reducing the isolation that makes migrant workers particularly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

**We believe technology, now more than ever, has a significant role to play in facilitating and maintaining workers' engagement with labor rights organizations and sharing critical information.**

The data collected has been used to inform and influence systems-level changes to reduce the potential for trafficking in this sector, as well as improve training and prevention efforts. At the same time, the project has strengthened the ability of local advocates and supporters to communicate with and assist farmworkers and inform them of their rights and available services.

Now Polaris is taking the knowledge gleaned from this project to scale with an expanded effort to reach worker populations in the United States. ■



# 02.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

For 16 months, Polaris used the Nonechka platform to survey farmworkers about vulnerabilities and risk factors for labor trafficking and forced labor.

This work builds on and expands knowledge from a pilot version of the project, which illuminated the basic mechanisms of force, fraud, and coercion utilized in the sector.<sup>1</sup> Collected data illustrates how force, fraud, or coercion during recruitment and on the job affects farmworkers' consent and willingness to make free and informed choices about their employment status.

To participate, workers either called a toll-free number or received a call to respond to a 20-25 minute survey. The survey was available in Spanish and six different indigenous languages: Nahuatl, Huastec, Tlapanec, Mixtec, Triqui, and Zapotec.

To reach workers with low literacy levels, the survey was also available in a pre-recorded interactive voice response system (IVR).

The surveys were completely anonymous, and the technology provided high security standards. Nonechka did not promote participation in the survey to people under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> →



1 Bidirectional Communication Pilot Project in the Agricultural Sector of San Luis Potosí, Polaris (January 2020), available at: <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Bidirectional-Communication-Pilot-Project-in-the-Agricultural-Sector-of-San-Luis-Potosi-percentCC-percent81-Mexico.pdf>



## Local partnerships

Polaris worked with partner organizations in Mexico who had already established strong levels of trust among the target populations through work defending and promoting their rights and their communities. Partner organizations used the digital platform to maintain contact with the workers, share useful information, and collect insights pertinent to their work, including monitoring and evaluating the impact of labor rights awareness building and educational workshops.

Real-time data analytics allowed partner organizations to send participants relevant information depending on their needs, from upcoming events to services they offer and more. Identifying organizations working with agricultural workers also informed which states were selected for Nonechka implementation because

the technology required in-person promotion and training for workers.

## Participant population

To identify situations faced by agricultural workers in their places of origin, transit, and destination, Polaris and its partners worked in eight states in Mexico: Baja California, Chiapas, Guanajuato, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Oaxaca. The states in the south are mostly states of origin for farmworkers (Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca); the states in the center serve as an origin, transit, and increasingly as a destination state (Guanajuato and San Luis Potosí); and the states in the north are the destination states, where most of the export-oriented farms are located. (Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California).

Most agricultural workers come from the states with the highest indigenous population, poverty, and marginalization rates in Mexico. Many are forced to temporarily or permanently migrate with their families to find employment opportunities, and, in many cases, to survive. →

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2 According to the “Trafficking in persons” definition in Article 3 of the “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children” (also known as the Palermo Protocol), the use of force, fraud, or coercion is not a determinant for persons under 18 years of age. Nonechka did not actively seek the participation of people under age 18, but 13 respondents identified themselves as minors.

Figure 1. States where Nonechka was implemented.



## Migration

Nonechka distinguishes between workers who migrate on a temporary basis and workers who live in the states where they work. Considering this, workers could identify themselves as part of one of the following groups:

- **Origin:** people who answered the survey in the state where they live permanently but who typically travel to work in other states.

- **Destination:** people who answered the survey while they were in the state where they work temporarily.

- **Settled:** people that live and work permanently in the same state.

Thirty-eight percent of responses came from those considered settled, 35 percent from people in their place of destination, and 27 percent from people in their place of origin.

Their responses indicate that agricultural workers mainly come from the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, and work or settle in Baja California, Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua.

Nonechka revealed a high rate of intra-state migration, that is, people who responded that they work and live in different places but within the borders of the same states. This trend mostly registered in Baja California, San Luis Potosi, and Sonora. →

## Data set details

The survey was available from August 2020 to November 2021 and received 695 responses, of which 72 percent were answered completely and 28 percent partially completed.<sup>3</sup> Of respondents, 52 percent identified as male, 45 percent as female, and 3 percent preferred not to answer. The high participation rate of women in the survey is relevant because women are rarely significantly represented in these types of settings.

Figure 2. Survey participation.

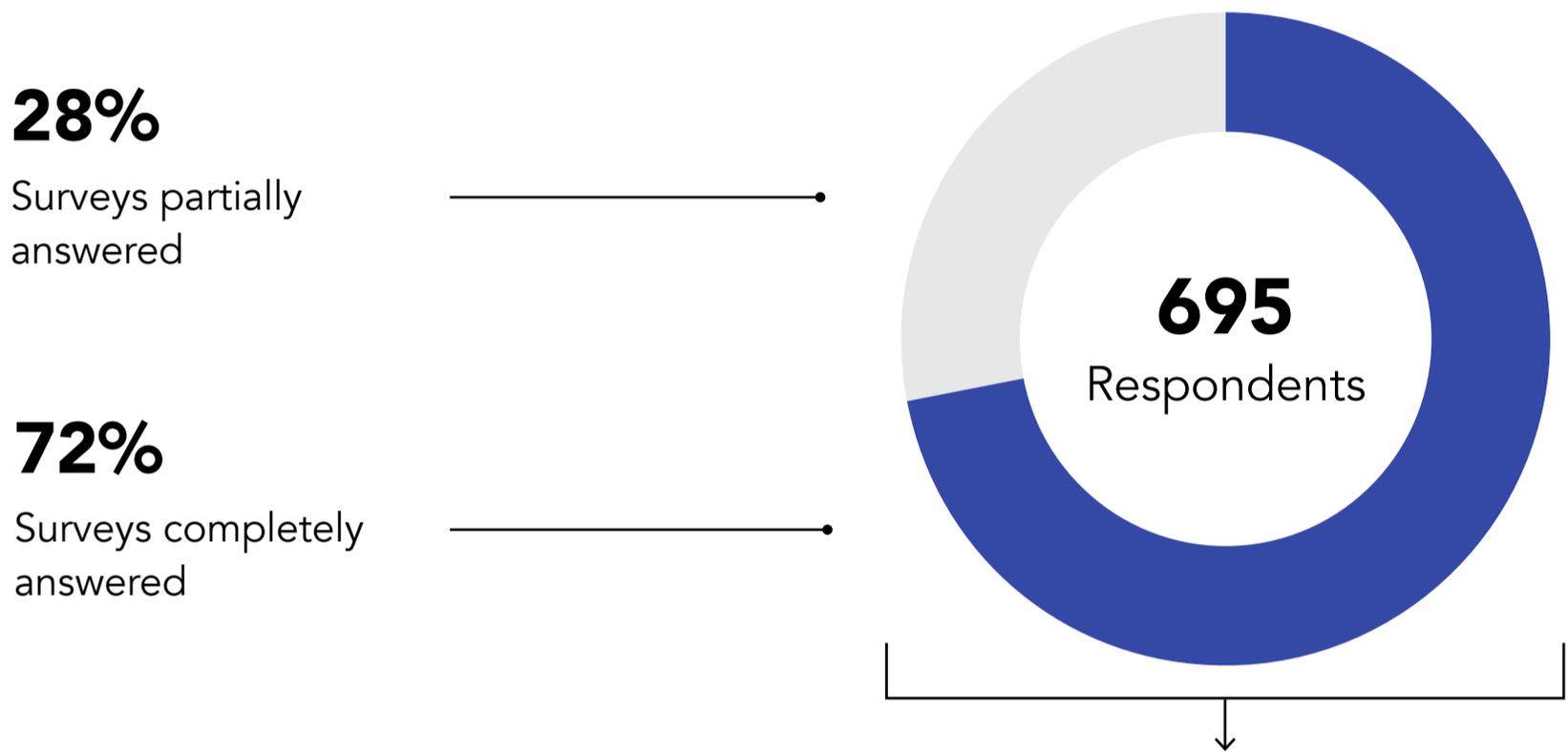
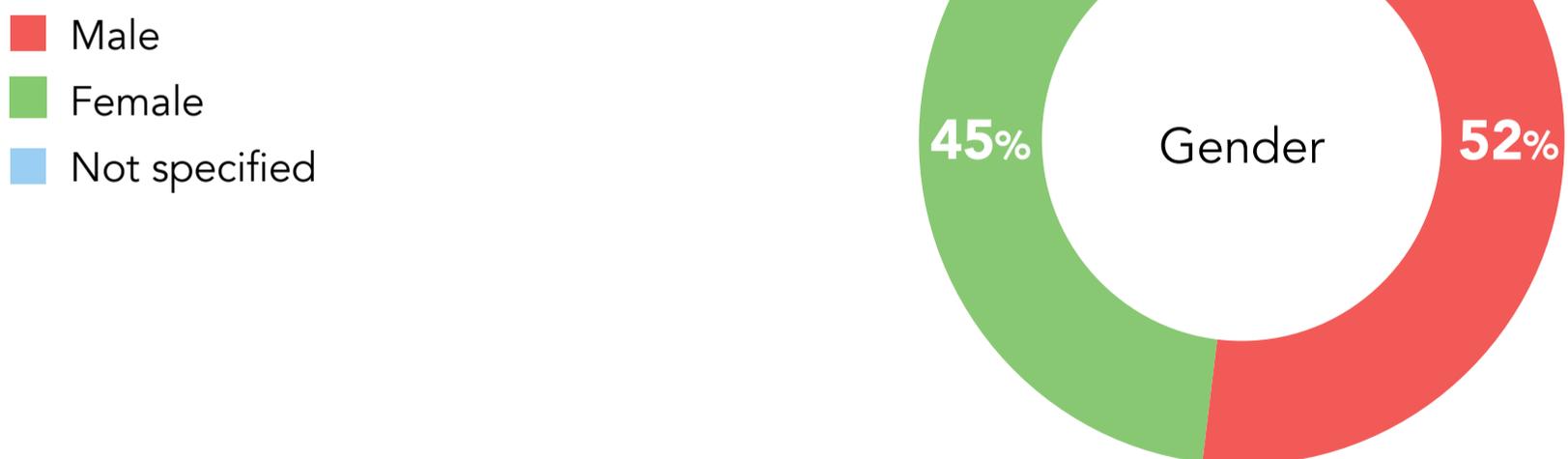


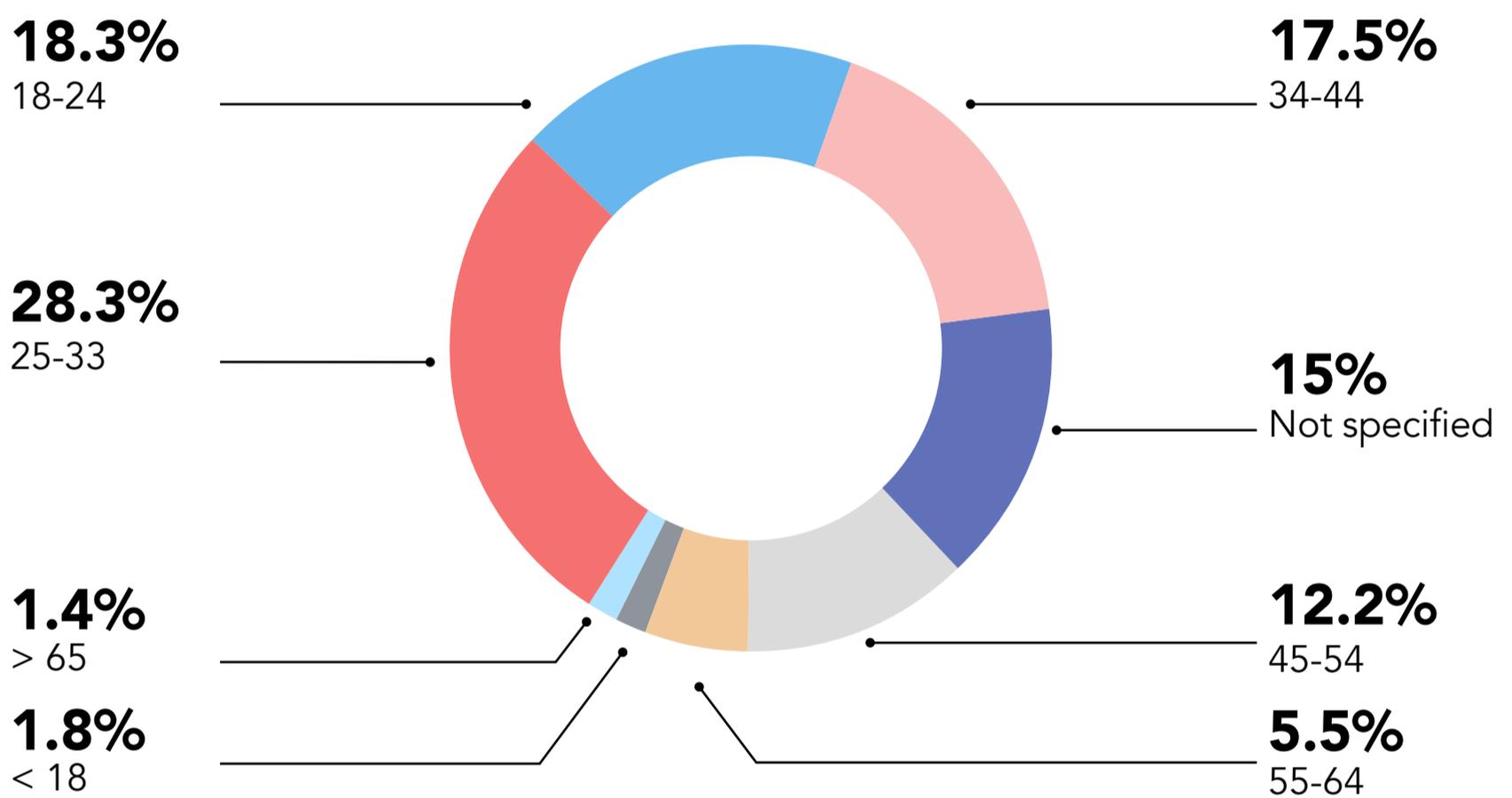
Figure 3. Respondents by gender.



<sup>3</sup> Blank or incomplete responses to questions were not included in the analysis.

Regarding age range, the category with the highest survey participation was 25 to 33 with 28.3 percent, followed by 18 to 24 (18.3 percent) and 34 to 44 (17.5 percent). The least represented categories were 45-54 (12.2 percent), 55-64 (5.5 percent), under 16 (1.8 percent), and 65 and over (1.4 percent). ■

Figure 4. Respondents by age range.



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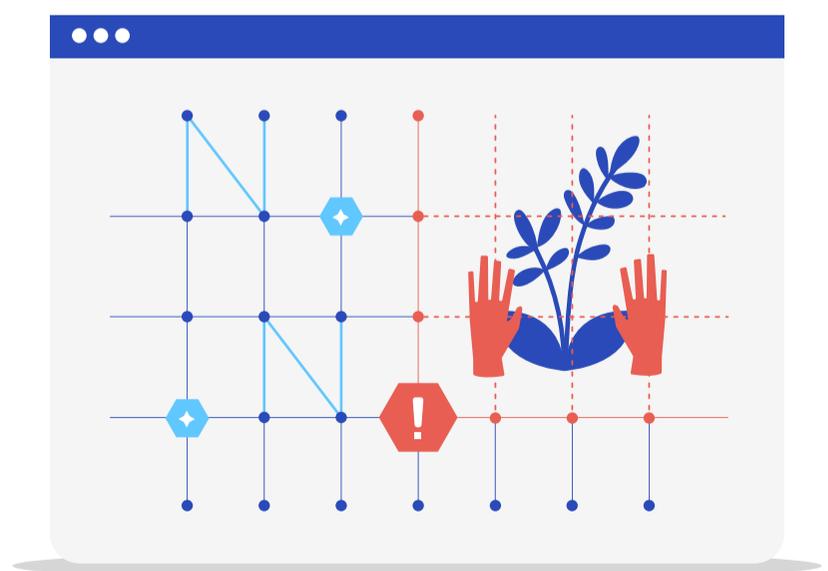
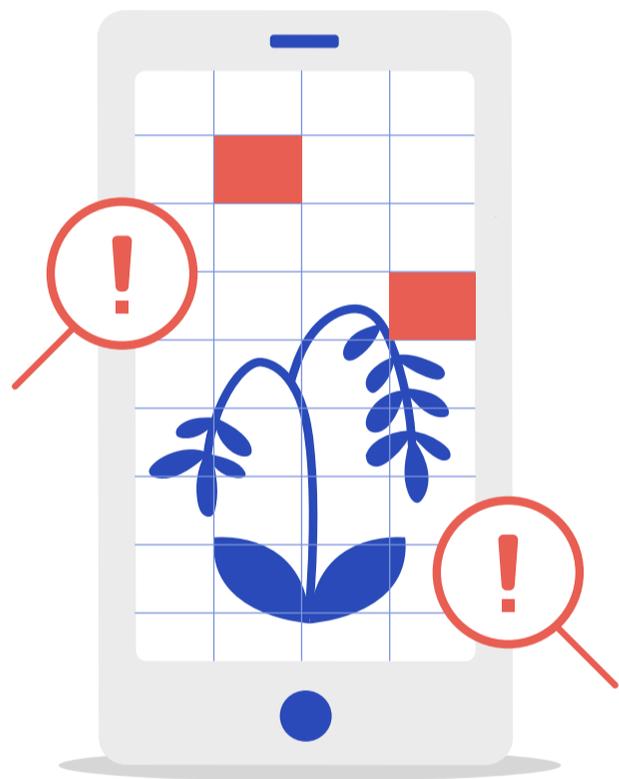
## RESULTS

This phase of the Nonechka project aimed to produce two separate but equally important outcomes: data collection from workers about the mechanisms of trafficking in the Mexican agricultural sector, and a set of learnings about communications and outreach mechanisms to overcome the isolation that these workers face.

### UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISMS OF FORCE, FRAUD, AND COERCION IN THE MEXICAN AGRICULTURE SYSTEM

The first pilot of the Nonechka project took place in San Luis Potosi and identified several key mechanisms of force, fraud, and coercion used to keep migrant Mexican workers on the job despite conditions that amount to exploitation or trafficking under the law. They are:

- Debt created when workers are paid at least part of the expected salary in advance
- Fraud associated with the lack of a contract
- Withholding wages
- Threats in the workplace



## Debt created by advance payment

### Context

The employability of agricultural workers in Mexico depends largely on their ability to move from one place to another. Mobility, of course, includes travel expenses — which many workers cannot cover up front. Agricultural labor recruitment generally happens through intermediaries who usually give an advance payment or recruitment bonus to workers to facilitate their travel.<sup>4</sup> This advance payment can place workers in a situation of economic coercion, as it forces them to remain in employment if they do not repay the money they received. The debt generated is usually greater in the cases of migrant families who must finance the costs of transportation and housing for all their members.

### Data collected

- 6.5 percent of workers who responded reported receiving advance payments at the time of their hiring.

- Of those who reported receiving payment prior to starting work, 66.6 percent had to pay that money back to the recruiter, contractor, crew leader, or employer, and 25 percent paid additional interest associated with the debt.

- Workers in destination locations reported a greater likelihood of receiving an advance payment at the time of their hiring.

- The amounts of money received varied between 100 and 16,800 pesos (approximately \$5 to \$840 USD).

- Most workers paid their debt through salary deductions (60 percent), especially workers in their destinations (75 percent). Other forms of payment included: a single payment (20 percent), discount at the end of the contract (14.3 percent), and other forms (5.7 percent).

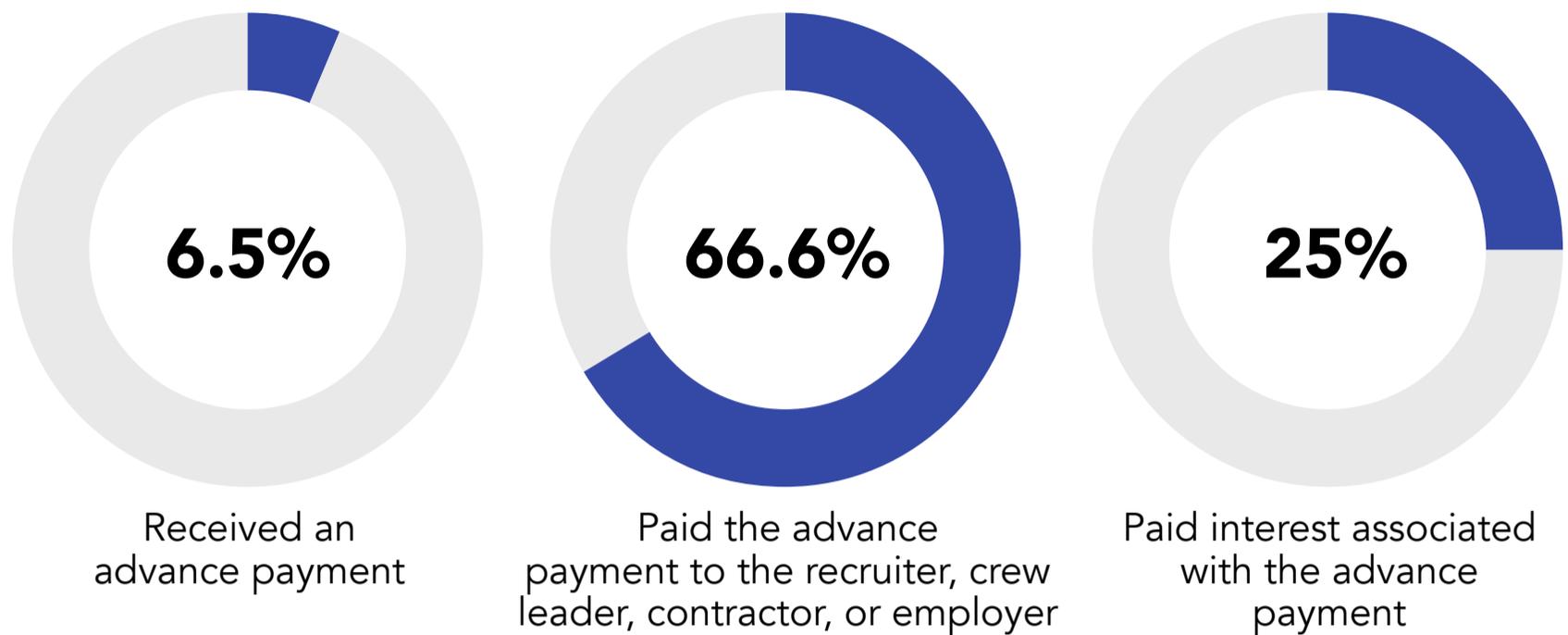
- Workers who received an advance payment used it to cover travel expenses. This reflects the enormous power imbalance between agricultural workers and their employers and intermediaries because accepting advance payment may be the only opportunity to access these jobs.<sup>5</sup> →

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4 General Direction of Strategic Research of the Belisario Domínguez Institute, Jornaleros Agrícolas. A un año de la rebelión de San Quintín, Temas Estratégicos No. 29 [Agricultural laborers. One year after the San Quintín rebellion, Strategic Issues No. 29] (2016), available at: <http://bibliodigitalibd.senado.gob.mx/bitstream/handle/123456789/1917/reporte29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=yPrincipales%20estados%20de%20procedencia%20e%20%C3%ADndices%20de%20pobreza>

5 The Institute of Business and Human Rights developed a series of key principles that employers and contractors of migrant workers must respect to guarantee migration with dignity, including the prohibition of charging commissions to migrant workers and the obligation that the employer must bear the full cost of recruitment and placement (“employer pays” principle). Dhaka Principles for Migration Dignity, available at: [https://www.ihrb.org/uploads/member-uploads/DPs\\_-\\_English\\_Short\\_Version.pdf](https://www.ihrb.org/uploads/member-uploads/DPs_-_English_Short_Version.pdf)

In summary:



## Fraud associated with the lack of a contract

### Context

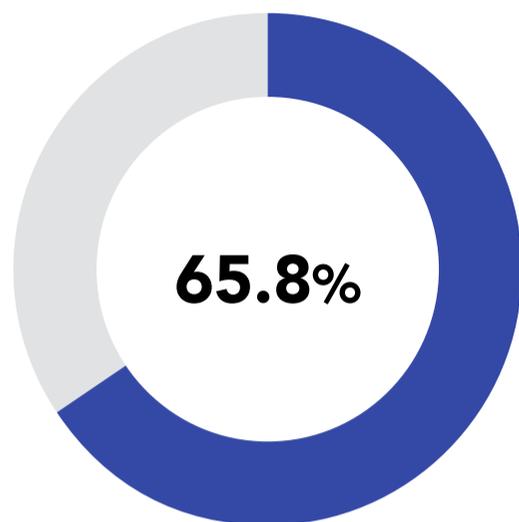
The lack of a contract is a risk indicator associated with human trafficking and forced labor due to the increased potential for recruitment fraud, especially in situations where recruitment happens through intermediaries. Official sources reveal that 93.3 percent of agricultural workers in Mexico do not have a contract,<sup>6</sup> which also prevents them from accessing other labor rights. Although providing a written and agreed-upon contract is the best way to prevent recruitment fraud, the most important factor during the recruitment of agricultural workers is to ensure that they know with certainty the terms of employment prior to the start of their work or migration. This includes ensuring they understand the components of the contract so that their consent to accept employment can be free and informed.

### Data collected

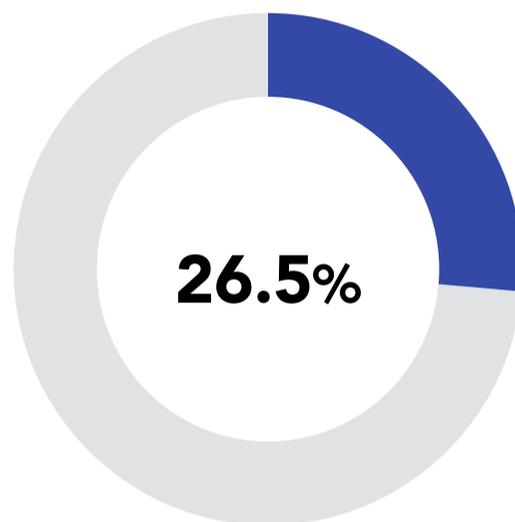
- 65.8 percent of respondents did not receive a document or information about employment conditions before starting their employment.
- 26.5 percent were not promised a specific wage, and 21.5 percent said that their wages were lower than initially promised.
- This lack of information not only increases the potential for fraudulent recruitment but also impacts the capacity of agricultural workers to access remediation mechanisms and other wage rights. For example, 39.8 percent indicated that they were unable to find a response or solution for their complaints, and 33.5 percent indicated that they did not receive pay for their overtime work. →

<sup>6</sup> National Commission on Minimum Wages, Press Release Number 10/2020, Mexico City, April 8, 2020, available at: [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/545854/Bolet\\_n\\_10\\_2020.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/545854/Bolet_n_10_2020.pdf)

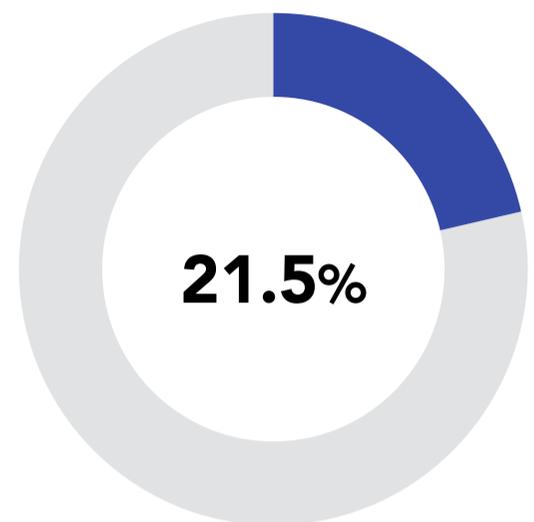
In summary:



Did not receive a contract or information about the job



Did not receive a promised wage



Received a lower wage than initially promised

## Withholding wages

### Context

Withholding wages is a practice that can force workers to remain in their jobs, especially agricultural workers, those who migrate for work, and others in contexts of labor precariousness and vulnerability. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the withholding of wages is the most common means of coercing people to remain in a situation of forced labor and should be considered an egregious practice.<sup>7</sup>

In Mexico, most workers employed in the agricultural sector earn minimum wage<sup>8</sup> and are employed on a temporary basis (which implies that they may go through periods in which they receive a lower income or none, depending on the labor supply). In this context, the withholding of wages limits the personal options of agricultural workers and can act as a form of coercion when it forces them to remain at work under exploitative conditions. →

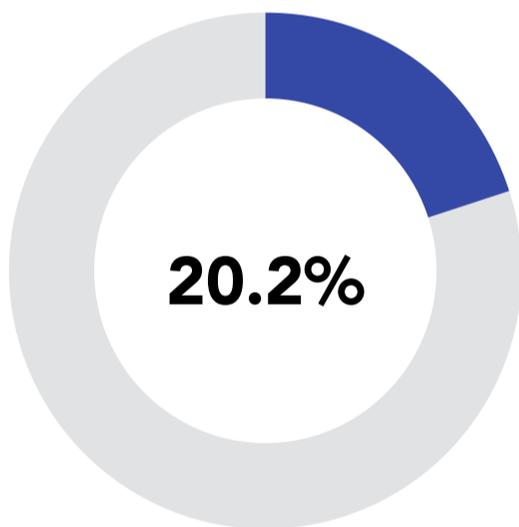
7 International Labour Office, Global estimates of modern slavery: forced labour and forced marriage (2017), p. 52, available at: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_575479.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf)

8 In January 2020, a minimum wage for agricultural work in Mexico was set for the first time at \$213.39 pesos (10.5 USD) per day in the free zone of the northern border and \$160.19 pesos (7.87 USD) per day in the rest of the country. Secretaría de Trabajo y Previsión Social, Comunicado conjunto 001/2021- La nueva política de salarios mínimos beneficiará a los que menos ganan [The new minimum wage policy will benefit those who earn the least], Ciudad de México 1 de enero 2020, available at: <https://www.gob.mx/stps/prensa/la-nueva-politica-de-salarios-minimos-beneficiara-a-los-que-menos-ganan>

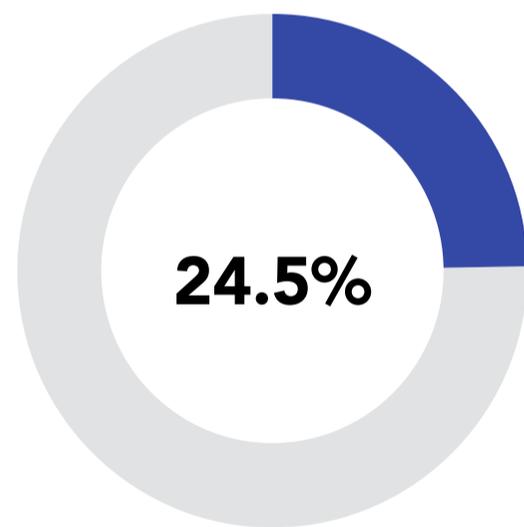
## Data collected

- 20.2 percent of respondents indicated that their payments have been withheld on at least one occasion. From that group, 48.1 percent responded that the reason was due to lack of funds on the part of their employers, 19.8 percent did not know the reason, 12.3 percent believed it was a form of punishment, 9.4 percent because they weren't paid until the end of their contract, and 8.5 percent because they owed money to the employer.
- The group that most reported a tendency to withhold wages as punishment were those working in destination locations.
- 24.5 percent responded that they did not have the ability or freedom to leave their job at any point. Of these, 24.3 percent responded that this was due to not having another housing option, 22.1 percent lacked funds to return to their location or city of origin, 12.5 percent because they were waiting on a final bonus payment at the end of their contract, 9.6 percent because the employer still owed them money, 5.9 percent because the respondent owed money to the employer, and 25 percent for other reasons.

### In summary:



Reported that their salary was withheld



Consider they do not have the freedom or ability to leave their employment at any time

## Threats in the workplace

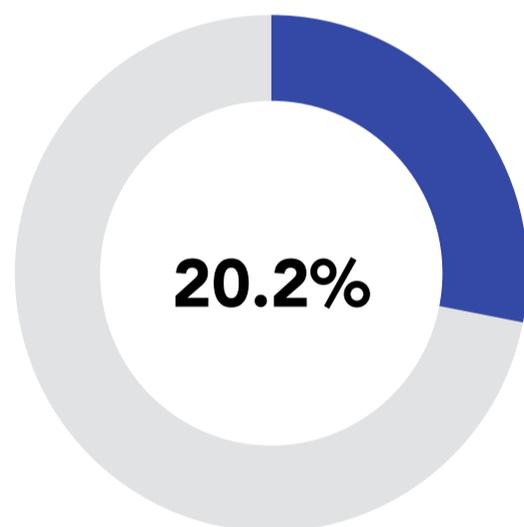
### Context

In situations of human trafficking and forced labor, threats that imply punishment or risk for workers are used as a method of control to force them to continue working. Threats to workers involving physical, sexual, or psychological violence or any other harm may discourage them from leaving employment and/or taking actions aimed at improving their working conditions. Threats can be used as a method of control throughout the entire migration process, from recruitment to the workplace.

### Data collected

- 28.2 percent of respondents reported that they received threats from their employer or from someone who works for their employer (such as a supervisor, foreman, crew leader, etc.) that something bad could happen to them if they do not follow their orders, whatever they may be.<sup>9</sup>

In summary:



Have received threats from their employer or someone who works for their employer (recruiter, contractor, crew leader, supervisor, etc.)

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<sup>9</sup> The survey was intentionally designed not to delve into the content of the threats in order to protect agricultural workers and avoid their re-victimization.

# THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN MEXICO

In addition to gathering information that can be used to advocate for change, Nonechka also sought to illuminate how digital technology can best be used to help agricultural workers in Mexico access information about their rights and advocate on their own behalf.

## Optimizing worker engagement

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of responses and interviews with implementation partners on the use of technology to collect data have generated the following best practices:

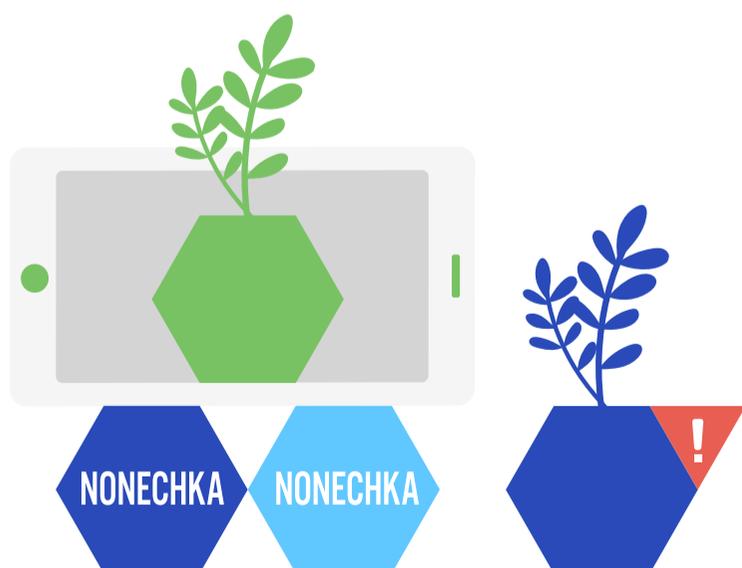
- Guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity of information is critical. To support participation in the survey, it is necessary to explain in detail how the project guarantees both of these privacy protections.

- Respondents' 24/7 access to the survey and implementation partners' intimate knowledge of community dynamics were critical in facilitating participation in the survey.
- Women working in agriculture may face different challenges and concerns than their male counterparts. Organizations seeking to reach these women must recognize those differences and concerns and address them during the outreach process.

- Technology and survey mechanisms must account for literacy. The selection of an IVR that didn't require participants to know how to read or write and using a limited number of short questions improved participation of agricultural workers in the survey.

- The availability of the survey in different languages permitted the participation of indigenous persons working in agriculture. Those that chose indigenous languages would not have been able to participate if they had not been available.

- No matter how user-friendly the platform, training on its use is helpful. Using and navigating this type of tool required agricultural workers to take an initial orientation to familiarize themselves with the tool and to develop their digital literacy skills in general. →



- Coverage and the reach of cellular signals are critical needs for the success and proliferation of these technology tools.
- These tools can be used to collect and share information in real time to deal with more immediate situations, in addition to monitoring emerging trends based on the farmworkers' experiences to inform long-term change strategies.

## Building trust and power through information

The 2,770 workers engaged with the Nonechka project received relevant information about wage rights, COVID-19, and how to protect themselves during their travel to their workplaces.

The project made it possible to send information targeted to specific groups by gender, age, language, location, or partner organization. Partner organizations also had the option of using the platform to communicate with their base and promote participation in their activities. From the use of this type of technology to inform farmworkers, we highlight the following outcomes and best practices:

- Nonechka amplifies the capacity to reach the greatest numbers of agricultural workers quickly, which is especially relevant in urgent contexts such as managing the COVID-19 pandemic or during natural disasters.

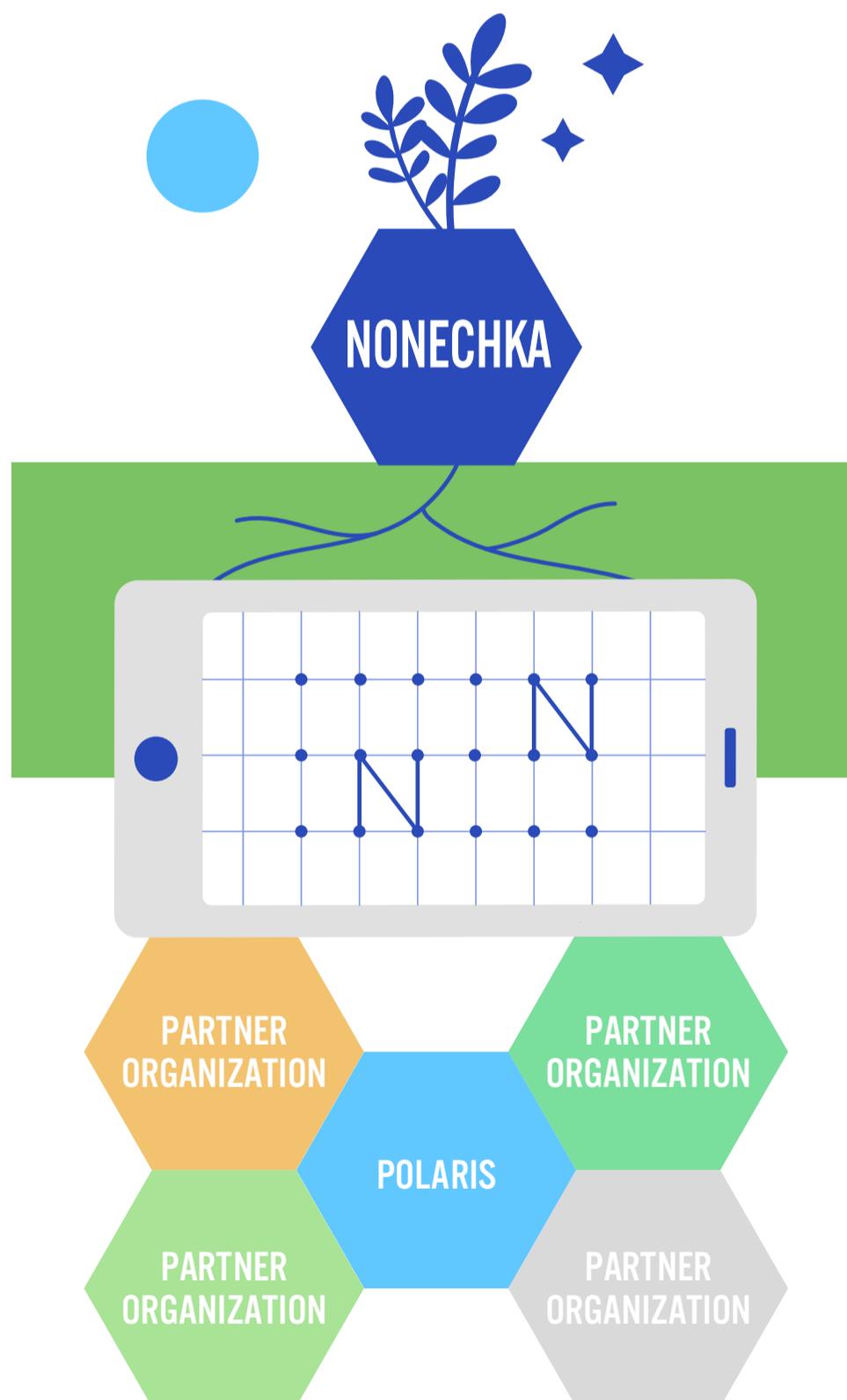


- When utilized to share information consistently, this technology helps to reinforce trust with farmworkers, their families, and communities and promotes the development of a community that is inclusive and recognizes their dignity.
- To encourage the acceptance of this technology, information should be complete, useful, and pertinent, responding to unique situations and taking into consideration group characteristics and their distinct knowledge.
- The most valuable information (to both build trust and support the everyday lives of workers in this sector) focuses on rights and solutions, including information about who is responsible for enforcing certain rights in the workplace so that workers are not left with sole responsibility for protecting themselves.
- Using voice messaging as well as SMS text enables the fullest participation and utilization because messages can be tailored to meet the language and literacy needs of the target population. →

- Other messaging applications, especially WhatsApp, are increasingly used by agricultural workers, and we are including this method in future strategies.
- Affordable cellular phones and coverage plans are critical components for the success and proliferation of these tools among agricultural workers.

Some telecommunications companies in Mexico do not guarantee free calls from 800 numbers, and it is important to ensure that these tools do not come with an added economic cost.

- Participation can also be enhanced through promotion on other platforms. ■



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# CONCLUSIONS

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Based upon analysis of worker feedback, it is evident that guaranteeing the right to decent work — incorporating access to social protections and advancement to other rights — is paramount to preventing trafficking and forced labor in the agricultural sector and impacting the systems that perpetuate inequality, exclusion, and violation of basic rights.

In the Nonechka project, technology and outreach strategies proved valuable tools for understanding the dynamics of human trafficking and forced labor in the Mexican agricultural sector. They also spotlighted situations that should be monitored for prevention by employers, intermediaries, and the government. Findings pointed to areas for improvement in enacting and properly enforcing laws and regulations ensuring the following<sup>10</sup>:

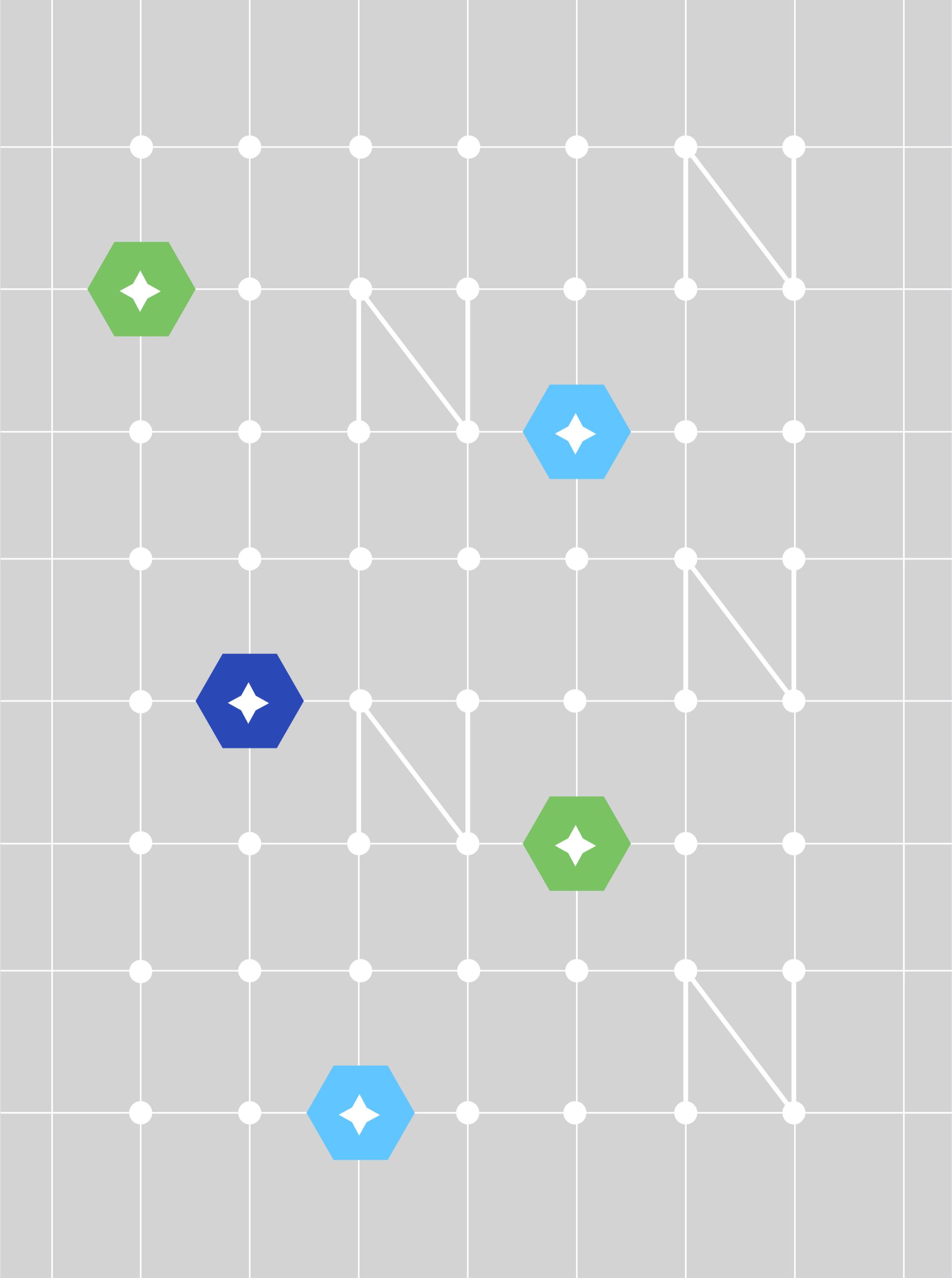
1. Access to work through mechanisms that prevent transfer of recruitment and travel costs to agricultural workers, especially those that travel across states
2. Delivery of a written contract, accompanied by adequate measures to ensure full understanding of employment conditions prior to the start of work activity and departure from states of origin
3. Access to a fair, equitable, and sufficient wage paid to agricultural workers in full and without delays or unlawful discounts or retentions
4. Freedom from coercion through threats or retaliation when workers demand their rights or organize to enforce them

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10 Full set of recommendations in the report. Available at: <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Nonechka.pdf>

Additionally, strategies aimed towards the digital inclusion of vulnerable groups present an opportunity to empower workers through access to relevant information and participation in decisions about policies that impact their living and working conditions. Despite the challenges, tools such as Nonechka contribute to reducing the digital divide for vulnerable populations, help improve language access, and can positively impact the lives of agricultural workers in Mexico. The development of technological solutions to inform and collect information directly from farmworkers should focus on their interest and benefit, relating to them as holders of rights that must be respected and guaranteed by the government and companies.

When farmworkers can share information about their recruitment and working conditions without fear of reprisal, they contribute to a more transparent recruitment process and deeper understanding of actual working conditions. By increasing transparency, they can collectively influence the protection of their rights and make visible the abuses they face, making it harder for recruiters and employers to exploit them. Nonechka provides critical infrastructure to promote this positive change, connecting them with crucial networks of support and information that validate their experiences. ■





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Strategic Initiative on Labor Trafficking



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