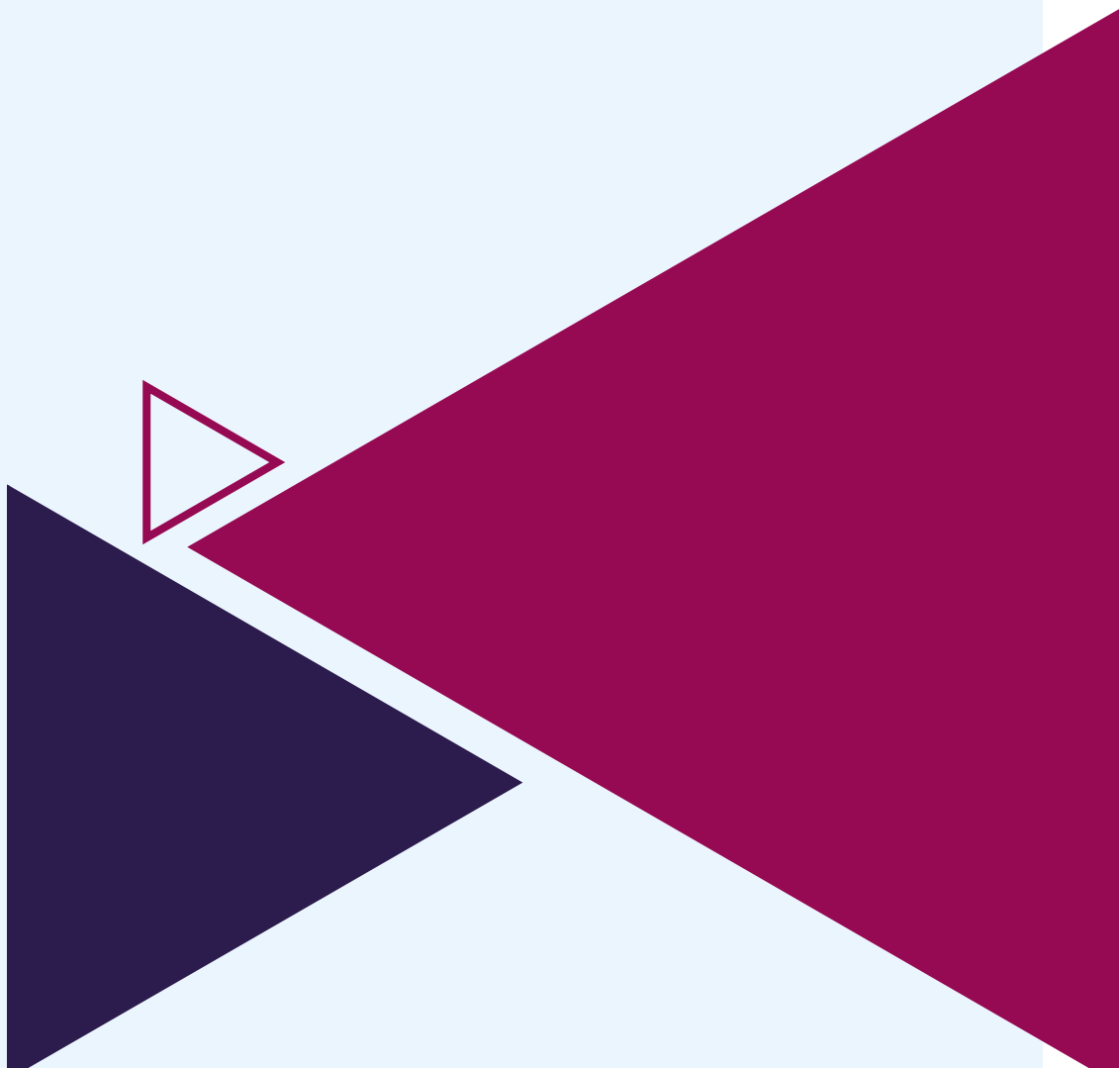




International  
Labour  
Organization

A large graphic consisting of a dark blue triangle pointing right, a maroon triangle pointing left, and a small maroon triangle pointing right, all overlapping on a light blue background.

► **Behavioural insights**  
in employers' choice of  
recruitment services  
for domestic work

Copyright © ILO (International Labour Organization) 2022

First published 2022

Publications of the International Labour Office enjoy copyright under Protocol 2 of the Universal Copyright Convention. Nevertheless, short excerpts from them may be reproduced without authorization, on condition that the source is indicated. For rights of reproduction or translation, application should be made to ILO Publishing (Rights and Licensing), International Labour Office, CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland, or by email: [rights@ilo.org](mailto:rights@ilo.org). The International Labour Office welcomes such applications.

Libraries, institutions and other users registered with a reproduction rights organization may make copies in accordance with the licences issued to them for this purpose. Visit [www.ifrro.org](http://www.ifrro.org) to find the reproduction rights organization in your country.

## FUNDAMENTALS

*Behavioural insights in employers' choice of recruitment services for domestic work* / International Labour Organization, Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS), Geneva: ILO, 2022.

ISBN: 978-92-2-036594-6 (Web PDF)

### Acknowledgements

This ILO report was prepared under the framework of the ILO Integrated Programme on Fair Recruitment (FAIR Project, phase II). The study was designed for the ILO by Mario Herberz, from the Consumer Decision and Sustainable Behaviour Lab in the Department of Psychology of the University of Geneva and Claire Hobden (INWORK, ILO Geneva) in consultation with Gaëla Roudy Fraser (FUNDAMENTALS, ILO Geneva). The research was implemented by Mario Herberz in collaboration with the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (HKPORI), the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) and the communications consultancy Rights Exposure. The report, authored by Mario Herberz and Claire Hobden, was commissioned and reviewed by Gaëla Roudy Fraser.

Funding for this ILO publication is provided by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation under the framework of the "Integrated Programme on Fair Recruitment (FAIR, phase II)" (GLO/18/53/CHE).

This publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Swiss Government, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Swiss Government.

The designations employed in ILO publications, which are in conformity with United Nations practice, and the presentation of material therein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the International Labour Office concerning the legal status of any country, area or territory or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers.

The responsibility for opinions expressed in signed articles, studies and other contributions rests solely with their authors, and publication does not constitute an endorsement by the International Labour Office of the opinions expressed in them.

Reference to names of firms and commercial products and processes does not imply their endorsement by the International Labour Office, and any failure to mention a particular firm, commercial product or process is not a sign of disapproval.

Information on ILO publications and digital products can be found at: [www.ilo.org/publns](http://www.ilo.org/publns).

**Visit our website: [www.ilo.org/fairrecruitment](http://www.ilo.org/fairrecruitment)**

Available only in PDF version

Photocomposed by Dina Alwani, Istanbul, Turkey

## Table of contents

Executive summary.....	iv
<b>1. Introduction to domestic work .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Introduction to behavioural insights .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Research objectives and methodology .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Qualitative interviews with employers of domestic workers.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5. Randomized controlled trial .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>6. Results.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>7. Conclusions and recommendations.....</b>	<b>17</b>
References.....	20



## ► Executive summary

---

Despite important policy advances in protecting domestic workers, domestic workers continue to suffer from violations of their rights in many places. Domestic work can place workers in a vulnerable situation in part because the work takes place in the private sphere, in the households where domestic workers carry-out their services, and where the influence of conventional labour market institutions can be limited. When service providers, such as private employment agencies, play a role in recruiting and placing domestic workers, they too can have an impact on the extent to which domestic workers can access decent work.

For household employers looking to ensure decent working conditions, the selection of a service provider can be a determining factor. To address this issue, the ILO and the University of Geneva collaborated to design a behavioural intervention, in the context of the ILO Integrated Programme on Fair Recruitment (FAIR, phase II), aiming to inform current and future policy approaches related to the protection of domestic workers. Specifically, we investigated the recruitment behaviour of employers of domestic workers, whose choices of an employment agency can have important repercussions on the situation of domestic workers. In Hong Kong SAR, China, for example, placement fees above the legal limit charged to workers or the confiscation of passports by employment agencies account for a large share of workers' rights violations. We hypothesized that an intervention informed by behavioural insights may be an important opportunity to guide household employers towards a more careful consideration and choice of an employment agency.

In a first step, we used qualitative interviews to acquire context-specific knowledge about the drivers and barriers of employers' recruitment behaviour in Hong Kong. The results showed that employers are mainly concerned about receiving good quality service and tend to underappreciate or downplay the role their choice of an employment agency can have for domestic workers. Employers' choices tend to be driven by inattention or convenience, such as following a friend's recommendation, rather than by ethical considerations.

In a second step, we combined the results of the qualitative interviews with literature on the effectiveness of social norm interventions to inform the design of 6 message frames, which we tested in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted online with more than 2000, mostly Cantonese speaking, residents of Hong Kong SAR, China. The message frames were intended to motivate household employers to search for information on employment agencies that would help them identify and avoid illegally practicing employment agencies.

The results of the RCT showed that residents consulted more information on the recruitment of domestic workers when the information was framed to help avoid agencies that cheat, protect employers and their helpers, and be in line with the social norm of their peers. Framing the information to help choose a professional employment agency, although expressed as an important choice criterion of household employers during the qualitative phase of the research, or as being provided by the government did not increase information consultation.

These insights will inform the design of awareness campaigns and information material to increase their effectiveness. Particularly, the results suggest that it is useful to highlight that other Hong Kong residents increasingly want to make well-informed decisions when selecting an employment agency, motivated in part by the personal benefits of avoiding cheating agencies, and the potential to protect both employers and workers. The results also underline the potential appeal of behaviourally informed communication campaigns. In conclusion, using behavioural insights to implement policies regarding the recruitment, placement and employment of domestic workers seems to be a promising approach that should be further leveraged and may be transferable to other policy contexts where individual behaviour plays a similarly important role in policy success.

# 1

## Introduction to domestic work

Worldwide, some 75.6 million domestic workers are employed in private households to clean, cook, and provide other forms of care (ILO, 2021). The services that these workers provide to the functioning and welfare of many societies are indispensable. However, their contributions have remained unrecognized, which is often reflected by the inadequate coverage of domestic workers by labour and social security laws. As a result, domestic workers constitute one of the most vulnerable workforces, with limited access to decent work. Since 2011, the ILO Convention 189 provides a global framework to protect the rights of domestic workers and improve their working conditions. Since the adoption of the convention, 35 countries have ratified it, and some 88 per cent of countries recognize domestic workers as workers under the general labour law, specific or subordinate regulations, or both (ILO, 2021).

Despite this legal progress, 36.1 per cent of domestic workers remain fully excluded from labour laws, but legal protection is just the first step in protecting domestic workers. Of the 61.4 million domestic workers (81 per cent) that are informally employed, 34 per cent are covered by laws but remain in informal employment because the laws are not applied in practice and working and living conditions remain some of the poorest in the labour market (ILO, 2021). This suggests that a legal basis may not be sufficient to ensure the protection of domestic workers' rights, and that a closer examination of the role of employer behaviour is needed. For example, in Hong Kong, where about 10% of the population are employed in domestic work, policy efforts have not succeeded in preventing severe violations of workers' rights. Most domestic workers in Hong Kong immigrate from the Philippines and Indonesia through private employment agencies that are hired by employers to place workers into their households (ILO, 2017). To prevent illegal practices, since 2017 a Code of

Practice for employment agencies promotes professionalism and service quality in the industry. Despite the Code of Practice adopted by the Hong Kong government, some agencies continue to violate workers' rights (FADWU, 2018). This is done through the charging of excessive placement fees and the withholding of passports, which expose domestic workers to the risk of debt bondage and forced labour (Varona, 2013; Rights Exposure, 2016). While these private employment agencies charge fees to the domestic workers, their main clients are arguably the households in which domestic workers will carry out their services. As such, household employers are key agents in determining which private employment agencies succeed, and which ones fail. Their choice as employers, in this sense, can either help promote or impede the human and labour rights of domestic workers. This example makes apparent that, without considering and understanding the behaviour of employers and their choice of an employment agency, existing policies may not be sufficient to effectively protect domestic workers.

Common approaches to the protection of domestic workers from unscrupulous employment agencies have insufficiently acknowledged and addressed the role of household employers. Household employers of domestic workers can help to prevent violations by choosing employment agencies that abide by legal and fair recruitment and employment practices. However, household employers' choices of employment agencies are usually made in the private sphere, which makes it challenging to identify and understand the factors that influence these choices. Crucially, it seems that household employers have limited awareness of the potential impact that their choice can have on their domestic worker. Indeed, most illegal practices of employment agencies come at no additional costs to the employing household and happen in the direct interaction between the agency and the worker. Moreover, household employers' choice of an agency may often be driven by low-effort decision rules, such as high convenience and social proof, foregoing a thorough information search that could prevent them from inadvertently choosing

an illegally practicing agency. Consequently, insights into the factors driving household employers' choices may present an important opportunity to guide them to more deliberate information acquisition and improved decision making. Behavioural interventions that build on these insights may importantly complement existing policy efforts in protecting domestic workers' rights.

Most commonly, behavioural interventions are developed on the basis of existing research findings in a top-down manner. However, this approach can have two disadvantages. First, findings from one context may not be transferable to another context because treatment effects tend to be heterogeneous (Bryan et al., 2021). Secondly, only building on existing research to develop behavioural interventions is likely to miss leveraging psychological factors that are specific to a given context or have not yet been identified by previous research. Since these risks are particularly relevant in the context of domestic work, where existing research is scarce, the present project combined an evidence-driven bottom-up approach with a literature-driven top-down approach.

Specifically, in a first step we explored the psychological drivers behind employers' choices of agency with qualitative interviews. Then, we combined these insights with existing research on social norms, that highlights the motivation of individuals to behave in line with what they perceive to be the dominant behaviour in their social surrounding (i.e., the social norm), to make a selection of message frames that aimed at increasing more deliberate information consultation and decision making of employers. The inclusion of two social norm message frames was motivated by research identifying social norms as a central driver for individuals' fairness, cooperation, and reciprocity (Bicchieri, 2005). Moreover, research on social norm interventions has found that communicating that a majority adheres to a given behaviour (i.e., descriptive social norm) or that an increasing proportion of a relevant social group adheres to a given behaviour (i.e., dynamic social norm) were successful in aligning individual choices with the communicated norm (Schultz et al., 2007; Sparkman & Walton, 2017).

## 2

## Introduction to behavioural insights

Behavioural insights are increasingly and successfully applied to inform and strengthen policy making in many domains. The idea behind behavioural insights is that a better understanding of human behaviour can help design programmes and policies that more effectively guide individuals towards improved decision-making. Decades of research have shown that human decision making is not only the result of deliberate reasoning, but also of intuitive decision processes that are automatic and may lead to unintended behaviours. Particularly these intuitive processes render a large amount of human behaviour prone to the influence of subtle changes in the environment in which decisions are made. Using this knowledge has guided policy making in addressing issues like the acceptance of a CO2 tax (Hardisty et al., 2010), retirement savings (Beshears et al., 2021), or the appearance for court (Fishbane et al., 2020).

Message framing is one of a number of tools used to guide individuals' decision making. Research has shown that slight changes in the way messages are formulated (i.e., framed), can considerably alter individuals' behaviour. These framing effects are usually achieved by emphasizing an aspect of a message that attracts more attention and support by a given audience. For example, research in the U.S. has found that framing a vaccination reminder to emphasize that the flu shot was individually reserved for a patient increased the attendance of appointments by more than 4% (Milkman et al., 2021). Similarly, in the U.K., a message that reminded unregistered citizens that failing to join the electoral register may be fined increased voter registrations by more than 10% (Kölle et al., 2020). While framing has also been found to increase ethical behaviour and cooperation (Kern & Chugh, 2009), an application and assessment of message framing in the context of domestic work is largely missing (although see ILO, 2017 for a pilot test). Given that employer behaviour plays such an important role in the choice of (il)legally practicing employment agencies, and this behaviour is beyond the influence of existing policies, the present investigation aims to fill this important knowledge gap.



# 3

## Research objectives and methodology

The ILO and the University of Geneva collaborated to design a behavioural intervention to motivate current or prospective employers of domestic workers to seek more deliberately information that would help them select a fair or ethical private employment agency. In a first step, we used qualitative interviews to acquire context-specific knowledge about the drivers and barriers of employers' recruitment behaviour in Hong Kong. In a second step, we combined the results of the qualitative interviews with literature on the effectiveness of social norm interventions to inform the design of 6 message frames, which we tested in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted online with more than 2000, mostly Cantonese speaking, residents of Hong Kong SAR, China.

Most commonly, behavioural interventions are developed on the basis of existing research findings in a top-down manner. However, this approach can have two disadvantages. First, findings from one context may not be transferable to another context because treatment effects tend to be heterogeneous (Bryan et al., 2021). Secondly, only building on existing research to develop behavioural interventions is likely to miss leveraging psychological factors that are specific to a given context or have not yet been identified by previous research. Since these risks are particularly relevant in the context of domestic work, where existing research is scarce, the present project combined an evidence-driven bottom-up approach with a literature-driven top-down approach.

In a first step we explored the psychological drivers behind employers' choices of agency with qualitative interviews.



# 4



## Qualitative interviews with employers of domestic workers

The qualitative interview approach was intended to identify the internal and external factors that influence employers' choice of an employment agency, including the time and effort involved, the network of persons sought for advice, and employers' level of awareness of illegal practices.

During April and May 2021, telephone interviews were conducted with a total of 20 Hong Kong residents that had either hired an employment agency within the last 3 years or were currently looking for an employment agency to recruit a domestic worker. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese or English and lasted between 25 and 40 minutes.

Overall, employers had a negative image of employment agencies with more than half of them having hired or currently hiring an employment agency for the second to seventh time.

One recurring concern of employers was unguaranteed service quality and a risk of being cheated by employment agencies. As a counterpart to this concern, professionalism and service quality emerged as important considerations for most, while some also considered ethics and social proof important when looking for an agency. Moreover, some employers reported to suspect a collusion between the domestic worker and the employment agency when they had a negative experience with an employment agency. With regard to employers' strategies when searching for an employment agency, a majority of employers, sometimes even exclusively, relied on recommendations of friends and relatives. As final choice criteria they tried to evaluate if an agency met their expectations in terms of service quality, honesty and service fee. Moreover, whereas some employers did not encounter any difficulties when searching for an agency, a majority found the available information on employment agencies

insufficient and not reliable. They expressed little trust in available online information and suggested that the Government or NGOs ensure the accessibility and credibility of information by creating a database with records of employment agencies. Finally, most employers were aware of the illegal practices of employment agencies and found them unacceptable, while at the same time not doing anything extra to avoid unlawful agencies and expressing doubt that fair recruitment was achievable in reality. Almost none of the interviewed employers was aware that Hong Kong had adopted a Code of Practice for employment agencies.

Taken together, the results of the qualitative interviews supported the idea that employers' choices of an employment agency are rather based on low-effort and intuitive decision-making, while largely neglecting their ethical implications. Message frames that account for this decision mode and speak to goals that employers more strongly care about when choosing an agency may thus be a promising

means to increase information consultation that can help employers to avoid agencies that violate the local Hong Kong Code of Practice.

Ultimately, we derived four message frames from the results of the qualitative interviews. These were then combined with two message frames based on literature on social norms. Research on social norms highlights the motivation of individuals to behave in line with what they perceive to be the dominant behaviour in their social surrounding (i.e., the social norm), frequently finding that social norms are a central driver for individuals' fairness, cooperation, and reciprocity (Bicchieri, 2005). Moreover, research on social norm interventions has found that communicating that a majority adheres to a given behaviour (i.e., descriptive social norm) or that an increasing proportion of a relevant social group adheres to a given behaviour (i.e., dynamic social norm) were successful in aligning individual choices with the communicated norm (Schultz et al., 2007; Sparkman & Walton, 2017).

# 5

## Randomized controlled trial

In November 2021, a total of 2,123 Hong Kong residents completed our RCT, of which 97.8% in Cantonese. Participants were required to be of age and to currently live in Hong Kong where the issue of illegal practices of employment agencies is particularly important. Participants' age ranged from 18 to over 70, with 40 – 49 being the median age category, and 50.4% identified as female. Mean household size was 3.47 (SD = 2.06), with a median monthly income of 50,000 – 70,000 HKD.

53.0% of participants had hired a domestic worker through an employment agency at least once, and 37.6% reported to currently employ a domestic worker. For those having already hired an employment agency in the past, the mean number of hired employment agencies was 3.13 (SD = 2.62), with 45.2% of participants reporting already having had a bad experience when trying to recruit a domestic worker.

We decided to test the different message frames in the context of a short survey experiment. After providing consent to their participation and completing demographic questions, participants first completed an attention check that instructed them to not select any of a number of presented leisure activities, ensuring that all instructions were carefully read and that data quality was good (Oppenheimer, 2009). Then, participants were presented with an infographic containing information about employment agencies that recruit domestic workers (see Figure 1). The infographic intended to put all participants, independent of their prior knowledge, into a comparable state of awareness about the hidden costs that might be involved when hiring an employment agency. After reading the infographic, participants' level of awareness was examined by asking them to what extent they would be interested in learning more about the recruitment of a domestic worker on a scale from 1 = Not interested at all to 6 = Very interested. This measure was merely to verify that participants' awareness showed a certain variability and was neither extremely low nor extremely high, which could have reduced the likelihood of finding an intervention effect of our message frames.



► **Figure 1.** The English version of the infographic which was presented to all participants before the presentation of different message frames.



Finally, on the last page of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to consult *additional information on the recruitment of domestic workers* after the survey. Crucially, the text describing this opportunity was framed differently in function of participants' random assignment to one of the framing conditions: neutral, cheat, professionalism, common protection, descriptive social norm, dynamic social norm, or government. Importantly, participants chose (or not) to consult additional

information after being thanked for their participation in the survey. This meant that the consultation of additional information took place outside of the experimental setup and was an entirely private decision, increasing the real-world implications of our results. For participants that chose to consult additional information, the redirection after the survey was automatic and led them to the website of the Employment Agencies Portal of the Hong Kong government Labour Department.

The seven message frames we tested were the following:

1. A **neutral frame** served as a reference point for the impact of the behaviourally informed message frames on participants' choices:

*If you would like to consult additional information that can help you or your friends and family when recruiting a foreign domestic worker, please select below.*

2. A **cheat frame** was designed based on employers' concern that employment agencies might cheat them:

*If you would like to consult additional information that can help you or your friends and family to avoid employment agencies that cheat, please select below.*

3. A **professionalism frame** was designed based on professionalism and quality being employers' most important criteria to select an employment agency:

*If you would like to consult additional information that can help you or your friends and family to select a professional employment agency, please select below.*

4. A **common protection frame** was designed to speak to employers' need for security and to counteract employers' concern that domestic workers may collude with employment agencies:

*If you would like to consult additional information that can help you or your friends and family to protect you and your helper when choosing an employment agency, please select below.*

5. A **descriptive social norm frame** was designed based on the importance of recommendations and social proof for employers' agency choices:

*If you would like to consult additional information that most Hong Kong residents have found useful when recruiting a foreign domestic worker, please select below.*

6. A **dynamic social norm frame** was also designed based on the importance of recommendations and social proof for employers' agency choices:

*Hong Kong residents increasingly care about making well-informed decisions when recruiting a foreign domestic worker. If you would also like to consult additional information that can help you or your friends and family when recruiting a domestic worker, please select below.*

7. A **government frame** was designed based on employers' lack of trust in available online information and their request for a data base of employment agencies which may be provided by the government:

*If you would like to consult information from an official government website that can help you or your friends and family when recruiting a foreign domestic worker, please select below.*

Participation in the RCT took a median time of about 2 minutes, for which the first 120 participants were compensated with the equivalent of \$3.20. Ethics approval was obtained through an independent review committee by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute that was in charge of the data collection.

# 6

## Results

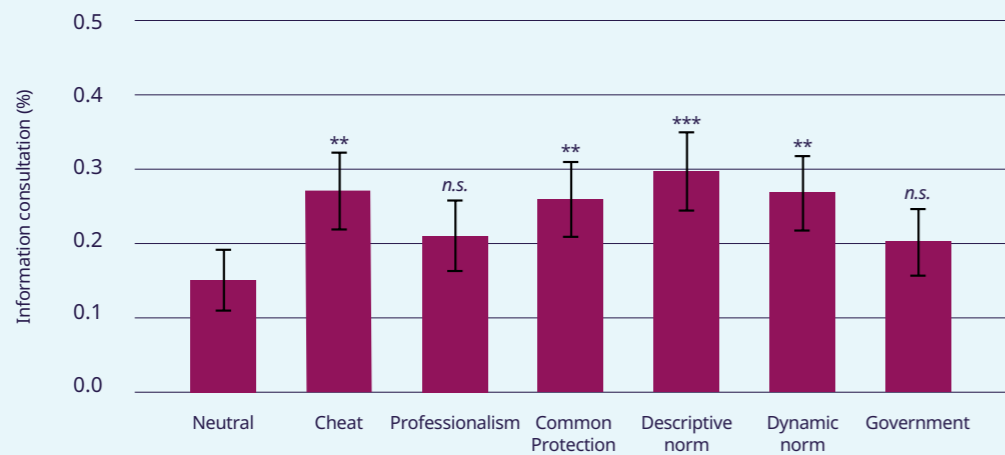
Seventy-six participants were excluded from the analyses because they failed the attention check, leaving a total of 2,044 valid responses. First, we analysed participants' general interest in learning more about the recruitment of a domestic worker after reading the infographic. Interest in the topic was moderate with a mean value of 3.34 ( $SD = 1.26$ ) on the scale from 1 = *Not interested at all* to 6 = *Very interested*. This assured that participants' interest showed sufficient variability to leave room for intervention effects of the tested message frames<sup>1</sup>.

Next, we analysed if the different message frames resulted in changes of participants' consultation of additional information about the recruitment of domestic workers – the main outcome of the RCT. While with the neutral frame ( $n = 294$ ), only 15.0% of participants consulted additional information, this share was significantly higher with the integrity (27.0%,  $p < .001$ ;  $n = 289$ ), the common protection (25.9%,  $p = .002$ ;  $n = 290$ ), the descriptive social norm (29.6%,  $p < .001$ ;  $n = 287$ ), and the dynamic social norm frame (26.7%,  $p < .001$ ;  $n = 300$ ). The professionalism (21.0%,  $p = .09$ ;  $n = 291$ ) and the government frame (20.1%,  $p = .14$ ;  $n = 293$ ) did not significantly increase information consultation as compared to the neutral frame (see Figure 2). All results remained unchanged when controlling for participants' age, gender, household size and household income as potentially influential variables in the analysis. Among the message frames that significantly increased information consultation in contrast to the neutral frame, the increases of information consultation were not statistically different from one another (all  $ps > .10$ ). This means that we cannot conclude if the superiority of the most effective descriptive norm frame over the other effective frames (e.g., cheat frame) is meaningful.

<sup>1</sup> Participants' interest was positively correlated with their consultation of additional information ( $rs = 0.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but this influence was statistically independent of the message frame effects ( $p = .15$ ).

► **Figure 2.** Percentage of participants who consulted additional information on the recruitment of domestic workers through an employment agency in function of message frame. With the cheat, common protection, descriptive social norm and dynamic social norm frame, participants more frequently consulted additional information than with the neutral frame.

There was no statistical difference in participants' information consultation between the professionalism and government frames and the neutral frame. Statistical significance of the differences between the designed frames and the neutral frame are indicated as follows:  $p < .001 = ***$ ,  $p < .01 = **$ ,  $p > .05 = n.s.$  Error bars indicate the 95 % confidence intervals of the logistic regression coefficients for each frame.



Next, we analysed to what extent participants' previous experience with employment agencies or domestic workers might have influenced the effectiveness of the message frames. Participants who have already hired an employment agency to recruit a domestic worker or who currently employ a domestic worker may have been less sensitive to different message frames. They may have already gathered sufficient information to develop individual strategies of choosing an employment agency and thus not feel the need to consult additional information on how

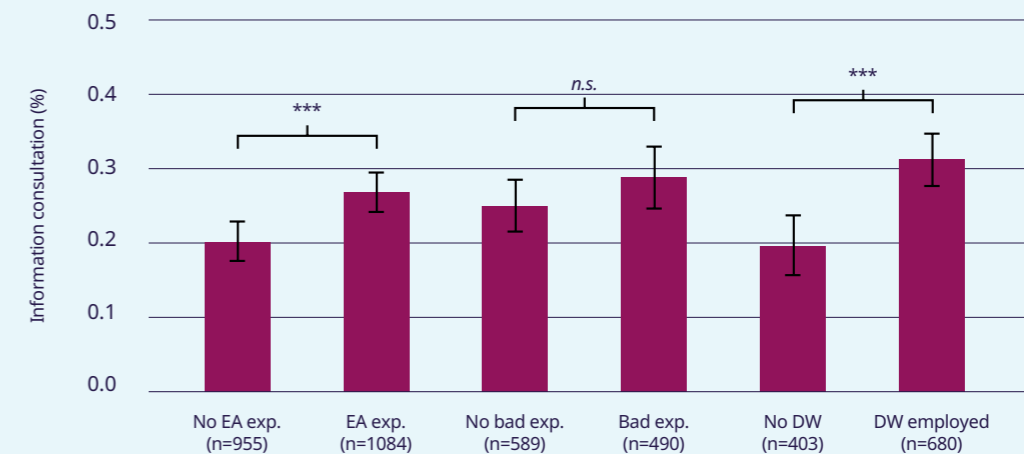
to recruit a domestic worker. On the contrary, it was imaginable that additional information may be more relevant to participants who have had experiences - especially bad ones - with employment agencies in the past, making them more susceptible to the message frames.

Interestingly, none of the past agency and worker interactions altered the effectiveness of the message frames (all  $ps > .10$ ). However, independent of the message frames, participants having hired an employment agency in the past were more likely to consult additional information than participants who had not (26.8% vs. 20.1%,  $p < .001$ ), potentially because they were generally more concerned about the topic. Similarly, participants who currently employed a domestic worker were

more likely to consult the information than participants who had only engaged with an employment agency in the past (31.0% vs. 19.6%,  $p < .001$ ), indicating the ongoing need of current employers for useful information. Finally, participants who had bad experiences with employment agencies in the past were not more likely to consult additional information than participants that had not had any bad experiences (28.8% vs. 25.0%,  $p = .18$ ).

► **Figure 3.** Percentage of participants who consulted additional information about the recruitment of domestic workers through an agency in function of having hired an employment agency (EA) in the past (left-most bars), having had a bad experience with an employment agency at least once (middle bars), and currently employing a domestic worker (DW) in their household (right-most bars).

Statistical significance of the differences between the dummy coded variables are indicated as follows:  $p < .001 = ***$ ,  $p > .05 = n.s.$  Error bars indicate the 95 % confidence intervals of the logistic regression coefficients.



# 7

## Conclusions and recommendations

In line with the increasing popularity of behaviourally informed policy making, the present project provides evidence on the effectiveness of message framing to complement existing policies in protecting domestic workers' rights. Based on the results of an RCT we found that: Information that is framed as (i) helping employers to avoid agencies that cheat, (ii) protecting employers and their workers, and (iii) motivating an alignment of employers' behaviour with the social norm of other residents, increases consultation of relevant information. In line with the importance of social norms for individuals' fairness, cooperation, and reciprocity (Bicchieri, 2005), potential employers more often consulted additional information when it was communicated as being valued by a majority or an increasing part of Hong Kong residents. Moreover, **residents seemed to care about avoiding being cheated by employment agencies**, which is in line with the bad image of employment agencies and the perceived lack of integrity in the sector.

Additionally, participants also consulted extra information when the potential to protect themselves and their worker from *illegally practicing employment agencies* was emphasized. This might have counteracted an intuition to suspect a collusion between domestic workers and employment agencies and might have emphasized employers' role as a protector which was found to have a positive effect on employers behaviour in previous research (ILO, 2017). Additionally, the security aspect of protecting the employer himself might have also contributed to the positive effect on information consultation.

Surprisingly, framing information as helping to choose a professional agency and as being provided by the government did not increase residents' information consultation. Although employers expressed professionalism as one of the most important criteria when choosing an employment agency during the interviews, this importance was not reflected in residents' choices to consult additional information in the RCT. One explanation for this discrepancy may be that individuals less strongly react to positive as opposed to negative frames (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Accordingly, framing the service quality of employment agencies positively (i.e., *professionalism*) may have had a weaker influence on residents' behaviour than framing it negatively (i.e., *cheating*). Another explanation might be differing notions of what constitutes "professionalism" in an employment agency. It could also be that professionalism is simply the way in which employers rationalize their choice, when in fact, their choice is driven by other subconscious factors.

The government framing similarly did not show the expected effect on information consultation. Although the lack of trustworthy information and a desire for a data base with records of employment agencies was expressed during the interviews, framing the additional information as being provided by the government during the RCT seems to not have adequately targeted this need. One explanation for this lack of effect may be that the identity of the source providing information about domestic work may simply not matter much to potential employers. Alternatively, governmental information may not be valued as much in the context of domestic work than information provided by other sources. **Entities such as NGOs or other international or local organizations may potentially be in a better position to disseminate information** on the recruitment of domestic workers that will be valued by Hong Kong residents.

Overall, the RCT results support the idea that the recruitment behaviour of current and future employers may not be as well-informed and intentional as might have been assumed. On the contrary, **recruitment behaviour seems to be largely driven by convenience which makes it susceptible to message frames that highlight goals they care about.**

The effects of the message frames on information consultation were not altered by any of the variables related to past interactions of residents with employment agencies and domestic workers. This suggests that the framing effects we identified were effective across individuals with a wide range of experiences with domestic work, supporting their robustness (Bryan et al., 2021). One reason for this robustness might have been our combination of a top-down and bottom-up approach to select potentially effective message frames. **Designing message frames based on the context-specific knowledge gained from the qualitative interviews might have increased the likelihood of their generalized effect in comparison to exclusively literature-driven approaches.**

Among the effects of past experiences, having hired an employment agency in the past or currently employing a domestic worker independently increased residents' consultation of additional information. This highlights that the experience gained from previous interactions with employment agencies or domestic workers did not sufficiently inform employers to leave them without the need of additional information. On the contrary, individuals with past experiences seem to be more concerned with the issue of recruiting a domestic worker and in need of useful information. Although past bad experience with an employment agency did not further add to this need of information, the **generally high need of additional information may be proof of the difficulty with which employers currently make a good and satisfying choice of an employment agency** in Hong Kong.

On a cautionary note, our findings should not be mistaken for a direct investigation of employers' real-world choices of an employment agency despite their practical value. We designed the RCT so that participants chose to consult information outside of the experiment which reflected a genuine private interest and a willingness to invest time and effort to be better informed. We moreover recruited mostly Cantonese participants who constitute the majority of Hong Kong residents but whose perspective is often underrepresented in local community efforts to protect domestic workers. This

highlights the practical relevance of our findings for better-informed employer decision making, which may help avoiding illegally practicing employment agencies. However, **while consulting additional information can improve employer decision making, additional work is needed to investigate its down-stream effect on actual agency choices.** Ideally, a field trial could shed light on the effects of different message frames on actual agency choices.

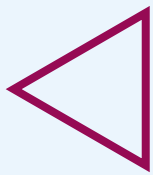
Despite this limitation, however, the present findings can importantly inform the design of awareness campaigns and information material to increase their effectiveness. For example, **information campaigns should highlight that an increasing number of Hong Kong residents' cares to be well-informed**

**when hiring an employment agency** to recruit a domestic worker. **Emphasizing that being well-informed can help to avoid cheating agencies and protect employers and workers at the same time** may also increase the impact of information material. Our data moreover indicated that **communication campaigns should rather be led by non-governmental entities**, since information provided by the Hong Kong government may not be considered sufficiently trustworthy. In summary, integrating behavioural insights into domestic work policy making and information campaigns seems to be a promising approach that should be further leveraged and may be transferable to other contexts where individual behaviour plays a similarly decisive role as in domestic work policy making.

## ► References

---

- Beshears, J., Dai, H., Milkman, K. L., & Benartzi, S. (2021). Using fresh starts to nudge increased retirement savings. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 167, 72–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.06.005>
- Bicchieri, C. (2005). *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-1-139-44714-0
- Bryan, C. J., Tipton, E., & Yeager, D. S. (2021). Behavioural science is unlikely to change the world without a heterogeneity revolution. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 5(8), 980–989. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01143-3>
- Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions (2018). *Agents of Change? Assessing Hong Kong employment agencies' compliance with the Code of Practice*. Available at: <https://view.publitas.com/rights-exposure/agents-of-change-english-version/page/1>
- Fishbane, A., Ouss, A., & Shah, A. K. (2020). Behavioral nudges reduce failure to appear for court. *Science*, eabb6591. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb6591>
- Hardisty, D. J., Johnson, E. J., & Weber, E. U. (2010). A Dirty Word or a Dirty World?: Attribute Framing, Political Affiliation, and Query Theory. *Psychological Science*, 21(1), 86–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797609355572>
- International Labour Organization (2017). *What's a household to do? Pilot testing a behavioural intervention to engage employers of domestic workers in the fight for fair recruitment*. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS\\_632126/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_632126/lang-en/index.htm)
- International Labour Organization (2021). *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers: Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*. International Labour Office – Geneva. ISBN 978-92-2-031955-0
- Kern, M. C., & Chugh, D. (2009). Bounded Ethicality: The Perils of Loss Framing. *Psychological Science*, 20(3), 378–384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02296.x>
- Kölle, F., Lane, T., Nosenzo, D., & Starmer, C. (2020). Promoting voter registration: The effects of low-cost interventions on behaviour and norms. *Behavioural Public Policy*, 4(1), 26–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2019.10>
- Milkman, K. L., Patel, M. S., Gandhi, L., Graci, H. N., Gromet, D. M., Ho, H., ... Duckworth, A. L. (2021). A megastudy of text-based nudges encouraging patients to get vaccinated at an upcoming doctor's appointment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(20). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2101165118>
- Oppenheimer, D. M., Meyvis, T., & Davidenko, N. (2009). Instructional manipulation checks: Detecting satisficing to increase statistical power. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(4), 867–872. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.03.009>
- Schultz, P. W., Nolan, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V. (2007). The constructive, destructive, and reconstructive power of social norms. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 429–434. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01917.x>
- Sparkman, G., & Walton, G. M. (2017). Dynamic norms promote sustainable behavior, even if it is counternormative. *Psychological Science*, 28(11), 1663–1674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617719950>
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice. *Science*, 211(4481), 453–458. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.7455683>



**Fundamental Principles and Rights  
at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS)**

**Governance and Tripartism  
Department (GOVERNANCE)**

**International Labour Office**  
4 route des Morillons  
CH-1211 Geneva 22 – Switzerland  
T: +41 (0) 22 799 61 11  
E: [fairrecruitmentinitiative@ilo.org](mailto:fairrecruitmentinitiative@ilo.org)

**[ilo.org/fairrecruitment](https://ilo.org/fairrecruitment)**