



► Promising practices for fair recruitment

May 2025

Hong Kong (China) – Promoting fair recruitment of domestic workers: Behavioural insights to encourage employer due diligence

Key points

- In 2017, Hong Kong, China, adopted a Code of Practice to prevent illegal practices of employment agencies that place domestic workers. However, violations of the Code remain frequent
- Employers can play a pivotal role in countering abusive practices through their choice of employment agency. The ILO implemented a multi-step behavioural research approach to promote employers' adoption of due diligence during the recruitment and employment process.
- Behavioural insights findings show that the most effective message framing for employers on due diligence emphasized helping to avoid agencies that cheat, protecting from illegally practicing agencies, and aligning with the social norm.
- The intervention included an online immersive game simulating the recruitment process, integrating key behavioural insights. The game increased employers' intentions to take due diligence actions which in turn translated into an increase of actual due diligence actions six months after the intervention.

Focus

FRI pillar: Promoting fair business practices

Sectors: Domestic work

Country: Hong Kong (China)

Responsible organizations: ILO, in collaboration with Rights Exposure Limited, the Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Worker Unions, the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, and the University of Geneva.

The fair recruitment context

In Hong Kong, about 10 per cent of the population are employed in domestic work. Most domestic workers immigrate from the Philippines and Indonesia through private employment agencies that are hired by employers to place workers into their households (ILO 2018). To prevent illegal practices, since 2017 a Code of Practice for employment agencies promotes professionalism and service quality in the industry (HKLD 2024). However, despite the adoption of this Code of Practice, some agencies continue to violate workers' rights (FADWU 2018). Violations include the charging of excessive recruitment fees to workers and the withholding of passports, which expose domestic workers to the risk of debt bondage and forced labour (Varona 2013; Rights Exposure 2016).

Meanwhile, employers of domestic workers tend to be unaware of these practices. Indeed, agencies generally charge excessive fees directly to the workers, without involving the employer, who, as a result, does not incur any additional cost. The challenge of fighting illegal practices therefore rests at least in part on workers' and employers' low awareness about which practices are legal or not, and what to do if they encounter illegal practices. And while workers may face valid fears of submitting complaints, employers would be in a stronger position to do so.

Employers, as the main clients of private employment agencies, are therefore key agents in determining which agencies succeed, and which ones fail. Their choice,

which is an inherently private one, can in this sense either help promote or impede the human and labour rights of domestic workers. 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.

The role of behavioural insights in policymaking and fair recruitment

Behavioural insights are increasingly applied to inform and strengthen policymaking 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. 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 court appearances (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 United States 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 per cent (Milkman et al. 2021). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, a message that reminded unregistered citizens that failing to join the electoral register may be fined increased voter registrations by more than 10 per cent (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 2018 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.

Understanding employers' motivations

To date, research has produced little evidence on the psychological drivers of employer behaviour in the context of domestic work. Therefore, the study used qualitative interviews to learn about the drivers and barriers of employers' recruitment behaviour in Hong Kong to inform the design of tailored behaviour change interventions. To this end, 20 telephone interviews were conducted with Hong Kong residents that had either hired an employment agency within the last three years or were currently looking for an employment agency to recruit a domestic worker.

The analysis of the interviews revealed the following findings:

- Employers have an overall negative image of employment agencies
- Employers are concerned about a lack of guaranteed service quality and a risk of being cheated by employment agencies
- Employers are seeking professionalism and service quality of agencies, while some employers also consider ethical aspects and social proof
- When hiring an agency, most employers rely on recommendations of friends and relatives, sometimes exclusively so
- Employers typically balance service quality, honesty and the service fee of an agency in their choices
- Employers distrust information on employment agencies and some call for the Government or NGOs to ensure the accessibility and credibility of information
- While employers are mostly aware of the illegal practices of employment agencies and find them unacceptable, they do not take specific actions to avoid unlawful agencies
- None of the interviewed employers was aware that Hong Kong had adopted a Code of Practice for employment agencies

Taken together, 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 ethical implications. Message frames that align with employers' priorities and intuitive decision-making processes were seen as a promising way to encourage greater due diligence when selecting an agency.

Testing message frames in an online randomized-controlled trial

Based on the findings that employers tend to be insufficiently informed about the employment agencies they utilize, message frames were designed to motivate employers to consult relevant information which would allow them to more easily identify agencies that perpetuate illegal practices, thus increasing chances of selecting agencies that offer fair recruitment services (ILO 2018 and 2022).

We derived four message frames from the employer concerns identified in the qualitative interviews. Complementing this approach, we additionally created two message frames based on relevant 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 has shown that when people learn that a majority follows a certain behaviour (descriptive norm) or that an increasing number of individuals are adopting it (dynamic norm), they are more likely to follow it (Schultz et al. 2007; Sparkman & Walton 2017). An overview of the used message frames is presented in Table 1.

In order to compare the effectiveness of the message frames, we designed an online randomized-controlled trial (RCT). Almost, 2 044 Hong Kong residents, of which 53 per cent had already hired a domestic worker through an employment agency and 37.6 per cent reported currently employing a domestic worker, were recruited through a local research partner and completed the online survey. All respondents received the same general information about domestic work to familiarize them with the topic. Then, respondents were randomly assigned to one of seven conditions that used different message frames when asking respondents whether they wanted to consult additional information on the recruitment of domestic workers (see Table 1).

Following their participation in the survey, respondents were invited to consult additional information on employment agencies. This meant that the consultation of additional information took place outside of the survey and was an entirely private decision, increasing the real-world implications of our results. For respondents 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.

In line with our expectations, the results of the RCT showed substantial variations in respondents' consultation of additional information about the recruitment of domestic workers. While with the neutral frame, only

► Table 1. Message frames used in the RCT

Message framing condition	Message wording
A neutral frame served as a reference point for the impact of the behaviourally informed message frames on respondents' 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."
An integrity frame was designed based on employers' concern that employment agencies might <i>cheat</i> 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."
A professionalism frame was designed based on <i>professionalism and quality</i> 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."
A common protection frame was designed to speak to employers' <i>need for security</i> and to counteract employers' concern that <i>domestic workers may collude with employment agencies</i> .	"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."
A descriptive social norm frame was designed based on the importance of <i>recommendations and social proof</i> 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."
A dynamic social norm frame was also designed based on the importance of <i>recommendations and social proof</i> 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."
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."

Source: ILO. Behavioural insights in employers' choice of recruitment services for domestic work, 2021.

15 per cent of respondents consulted additional information, this share was significantly higher with the integrity frame, the common protection frame, the descriptive social norm frame, and the dynamic social norm frame. The professionalism frame and the government frame did not significantly increase information consultation as compared to the neutral frame (see Figure 1). The results remained unchanged when accounting for respondents'

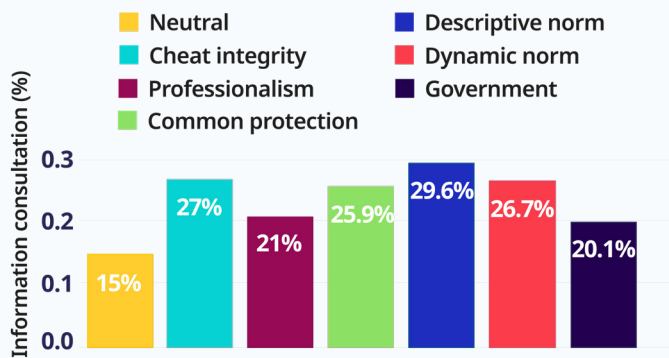
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age, gender, household size and household income. In line with our predictions, most of the tested message frames outperformed the neutral frame, supporting the benefit of behaviourally informed messaging. Interestingly, simply labelling information as being provided by government did not have this effect, nor did a reminder of the goal to hire a “professional agency”, which may have already been on the top of employers’ minds.

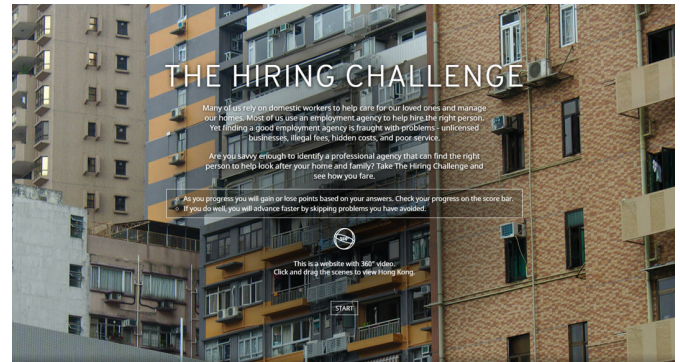
► **Figure 1. Percentage of respondents (N = 2044) consulting additional information on domestic worker recruitment via employment agency**



Note: Percentage of respondents (N = 2044) who consulted additional information on the recruitment of domestic workers through an employment agency as a function of message frame (see Table 1). Error bars depict the 95% confidence intervals of the means.

Design of an educational immersive web experience

In the next phase of the project, we built on our insights to design an innovative intervention to increase employers’ adoption of due diligence actions to protect domestic workers from illegally practicing employment agencies. Specifically, text elements prompting thoughts about integrity, common protection, and social norm were integrated into the design of The Hiring Challenge – an immersive web experience that casts the user in the role of a soon-to-be parent trying to hire a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong using an employment agency. The website is part of the wider work done by the ILO aimed at raising awareness amongst employers of the exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and providing them with tips on how they can contribute towards positive change.



Landing page of The Hiring Challenge immersive experience website: thehiringchallenge.org.

Throughout the immersive experience, users need to navigate a series of real-life choices in order to find an agency that provides a professional service, whilst at the same time not exploiting the worker they eventually hire. The gamified experience consists of six chapters, at the end of which the user is confronted with a choice among different options related to the recruitment process. After making a choice, the user receives feedback on the quality of their choice and is presented with an educational video of about one to two minutes that elaborates on common challenges encountered at the respective stage of the process through testimonies of employers of domestic helpers. At the end of the immersive experience, which takes about 15 minutes, users are provided with tailored recommendations on how to improve their recruitment choices based on their final score. The integration of our insights from the previous project phase is realized by prominently including text elements using integrity frames, common protection frames, and social norms in the chapter takeaways and the final recommendations.

We moreover promoted participation in the gamified experience by a social media campaign through a series of advertisements displaying excerpts of employer testimonies that reflected the behaviourally informed message framing. The campaign resulted in strong engagement levels, motivating over 8,000 individuals, mostly in the targeted demographics, including those with parental or elderly caretaking responsibilities, to engage with the content, exceeding reach and engagement of a similar campaign realized in a previous year.

Impact on employers' intentions to protect domestic workers

The last phase of the project aimed to evaluate the effect of the immersive experience on employers' intentions to conduct due diligence in the process of recruiting and employing a domestic worker.

► Box 1. Due diligence actions: Employers' adoption intentions and actual adoption recorded after 6 months

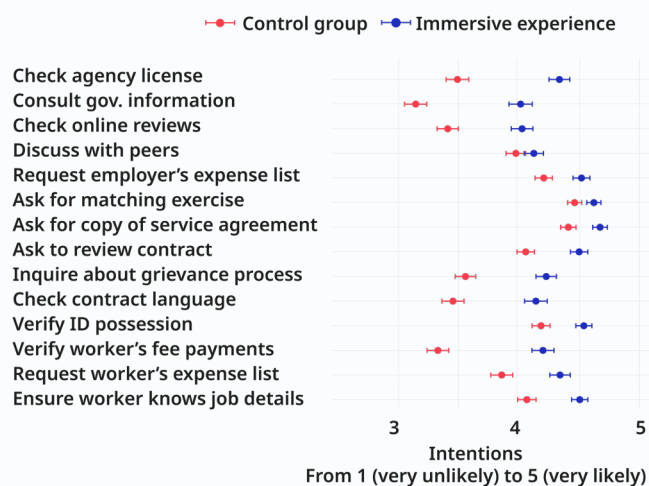
1. Check whether an agency is licensed by the Labour Department.
2. Consult information on domestic work provided by official sources (e.g., the Government Employment Portal).
3. Check online reviews or customer references of an agency, for example via Facebook.
4. Discuss with friends or family about an agency you may be considering.
5. Ask for a list of all services and expenses charged to you by an agency.
6. Ask for a matching exercise (e.g., interview) between you and your domestic worker in order to ensure a good fit with your needs.
7. Ask for a copy of the standard service agreement between you and an agency.
8. Ask an agency to take you through the employment contract between you and your domestic worker.
9. Inquire whether an agency has a process to manage grievance by you or your worker.
10. Check whether an agency provides your domestic worker with a contract in a language they can understand.
11. Check whether your domestic worker is in the possession of their identity documents (e.g., work permit, passport).
12. Ask your domestic worker whether she has ever been charged a fee by an agency.
13. Ask for a list of all services and expenses charged to your worker by an agency.
14. Check whether your domestic worker is fully informed by the employment agency with details about the nature of the job and living and working arrangements.

Source: adapted from ILO (2020) Due Diligence Guide - Checklist to guide the selection of employment agencies in Hong Kong.

We collaborated with a local research partner to recruit an online sample of 1,222 Hong Kong residents that were either in the process of searching for an employment agency to hire a domestic worker or currently employing a domestic worker in their home. In line with the gold-standard of impact assessment, we then assigned these respondents to one of two groups: an intervention group that completed the immersive experience and a control group that did not. Then, all respondents were asked to indicate their intentions to take a range of due diligence actions (see Box 1) the next time they were in the process of hiring a domestic worker.

To evaluate the immediate impact of completing the immersive experience, we compared the intentions to conduct due diligence of respondents in the intervention group with those of respondents in the control group. In line with our expectations, the results showed that completing the immersive experience resulted in increased intentions to engage in each one of the due diligence actions (mean response = 4.3) in comparison to the control group (mean response = 3.8; Figure 2).

► Figure 2. Mean intentions to take due diligence actions for participants having completed the immersive experience (N = 411)



Note: Mean intentions to take due diligence actions (see Table 2 for complete wordings) for participants having completed the immersive experience (N = 411) in comparison to a control group (N = 811). Error bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals of the group means.

Moreover, respondents having completed the immersive experience were asked to what extent they agreed with statements relating to its usefulness on a scale from 1 – “I do not agree at all” to 5 – “I very much agree”. The results showed that respondents moderately to highly agreed that the immersive experience provided clear, engaging, and useful information for hiring and interacting with a domestic worker. Moreover, respondents were fairly convinced that completing the immersive experience will help them avoid problems when recruiting a domestic worker in the future and intended to warn friends or family members to watch out for illegal practices of employment agencies. Respondents were somewhat less inclined to recommend completing the immersive experience to a friend or family member or to share it on social media. See Figure 3 for an overview of these results.

► **Figure 3. Mean agreement on the usefulness and use of information from the immersive experience by intervention group participants (N = 411)**



Note: Mean agreement with statements concerning the usefulness and use of information provided in the immersive experience by participants in the intervention group (N = 411). Error bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals of the means.

Impact on employers' due diligence actions six months later

In the last phase of the project, we extended our impact assessment strategy to measure actual participation in due diligence actions six months after the initial intervention. For this, we recontacted 358 respondents who had affirmatively answered that they were currently searching for an employment agency to hire a foreign domestic worker. We expected that most of these respondents would have completed the process of recruiting a domestic worker through an employment agency, which typically takes between three and six months. A total of 216 respondents completed this second online survey. The survey contained the same due diligence actions as the previous one (Figure 4), however now we did not ask for respondents' intentions but which of the actions they had actually engaged in during their most recent experiences when employing or hiring a domestic worker, with answer options “I did not do this” and “I did this (at least once)”.

We first assessed to what extent respondents' intentions in the first survey were predictive of their actual engagement in due diligence actions until the follow-up survey. This analysis confirmed that higher intentions were linked to a higher probability of having engaged in a due diligence action. Then, to evaluate the long-term impact of completing the immersive experience, we compared the share of respondents having engaged in each of the due diligence actions between the intervention and the control group. The immersive experience significantly increased engagement for two out of the 14 due diligence actions: checking whether an agency is licensed by the labour department of Hong Kong (49 per cent vs. 31 per cent in the control group) and to check online reviews or customer references of an agency (67 per cent vs. 57 per cent in the control group).

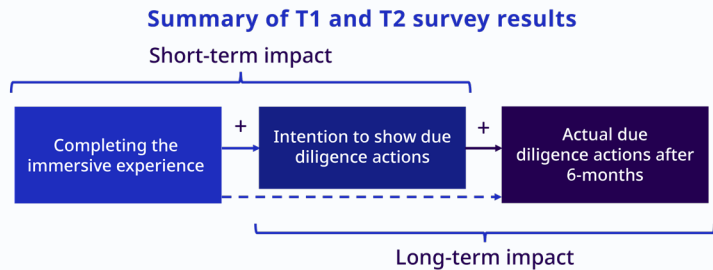
In summary, the data of both surveys showed a strong link between intentions and self-reported actions at follow-up, supporting a causal model in which completing the immersive experience increases intentions to take due diligence actions which in turn translate into actual due diligence actions. In addition to this evidence for an indirect effect through behavioural intentions, the data also showed a direct effect for checking an employment agencies' license and its online reviews, suggesting that its more suited to increase due diligence for these specific actions. Figure 4 summarizes the findings of both, the short- and the long-term behavioural impact of the immersive experience.

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► **Figure 4. Summary of the findings on short- and long-term behavioural impact of the immersive experience**



Note: Summary of the survey results establishing the positive influence of completing the immersive experience and employers' intended and actual engagement in due diligence actions. The dashed line indicates the indirect effect of completing the immersive experience on actual actions through intentions.

Challenges and opportunities

- Testing the immersive experience with a larger, representative sample of employers of domestic workers in Hong Kong would provide further support for its benefits.
- The immersive experience could be optimized to more strongly focus on those due diligence actions for which we did not observe a direct effect. Reminding respondents about the key takeaways after 2-3 months may additionally help employers' adoption of a wider range of actions.
- A large-scale dissemination of the immersive experience faces a practical constraint of employers needing to actively opt into completing the immersive experience. Prominently promoting participation during suitable moments of administrative procedures, such as childbirth, may increase its reach and impact.

Practical implications

- A behavioural sciences approach can provide insights into persisting challenges of fair recruitment that are beyond the scope of conventional policies.
- Behaviourally informed messaging can motivate employers of domestic workers to learn more about good practices and fair recruitment.
- An immersive gaming experiences, informed by behavioural insights, increases the likelihood that employers will take due diligence actions.
- A rigorous impact assessment can provide a realistic estimate of the value of behavioural sciences and innovative sensibilisation strategies.

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