



What's a household to do?

Pilot testing a behavioural intervention to engage employers of domestic workers in the fight for fair recruitment

In Hong Kong, at least 346,000 domestic workers – about 10% of the population – are employed in private households to clean, cook, and provide other forms of care. The workers come predominantly from the Philippines and Indonesia through some 2,000 private employment agencies (EAs) that place them in households. By law, EAs in Hong Kong can charge domestic workers fees for placement up to 10% of the domestic worker's first month salary in exchange for employment, while recruitment agencies in the Philippines are not allowed to charge any fees for placement. In practice however, workers are sometimes charged fees that amount to the thousands, illegally in the Philippines and way above the legal limit in Hong Kong, placing domestic workers at risk of debt bondage and forced labour (Varona, 2013; Rights Exposure, 2016).

Government, trade unions, and civil society have worked to address the practice of charging illegal recruitment fees. The Government of Hong Kong SAR has adopted a Code of Practice for EAs to promote compliance with the fee legislation. Trade unions and NGOs have undertaken studies to monitor fee-charging practices, and the effectiveness of the Code of Practice. They also raise awareness about collection of illegal fees, and support domestic workers to submit complaints when they have reason to believe they have been charged illegal fees. The studies and experience of these organizations shows several factors explain, in part, the continued charging of illegal fees: first, domestic workers are not fully aware of the law; second, domestic workers are afraid their employers will not support them if they file a complaint against the agency; third, even if they do submit complaints, immigration rules make it difficult for them to see their complaints through and be able to remain in Hong Kong SAR during the trial; and finally, gathering the necessary evidence to win claims has also proven challenging.

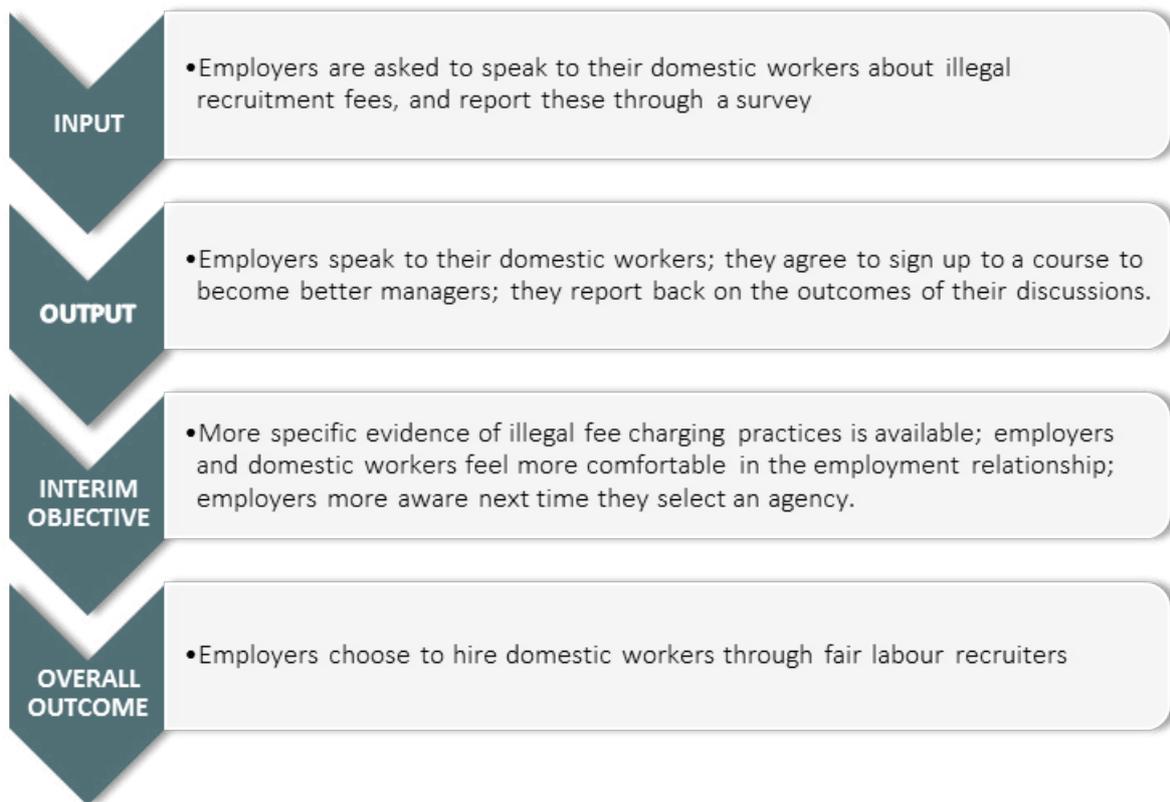
Meanwhile, employers of domestic workers appear to have little awareness of this practice. Indeed, it comes at no additional financial cost to them, and in general, it appears the agencies charge the fees directly to the workers, without involving the employer.

The challenge of fighting illegal recruitment fees therefore rests at least in part on workers' and employers' low awareness that such fees are illegal, and what to do if they encounter such practices. And while workers may face valid fears of submitting complaints, employers would be in a stronger position to do so. Moreover, employers might have good reason to fight these illegal practices, as they are themselves clients of these EAs.

For this reason, the ILO developed an intervention to encourage employers, as clients of EAs, to take action against illegal recruitment fees charged to domestic workers. The intervention encouraged employers to **ask their domestic workers if they have ever been charged illegal fees, and to report cases back to them, the ILO, the government's hotline, or a trade union.** These interim objectives were intended to act as stepping-stones to reach the longer-term outcome of having employers seek out and do business with fair labour recruiters only, as well as to improve dialogue between employers and workers in the home (see [logical framework below](#)).

¹ POEA revised Rules and Regulations governing the recruitment and employment of land based overseas Filipino workers, 2016, section 51.

² However, it is important to note some reports, such as "Between a Rock and a Hard Place", have found that EAs do ask employers to sign-over the domestic worker's checks to the EA, as a means of repaying the loans they have taken out to pay for the illegal fees.



METHOD

The ILO partnered with [HelperChoice](#), an online platform through which employers can find domestic workers for hire, to carry out a behavioural intervention to encourage employers of domestic workers to help promote fair recruitment.

In addition, the ILO explored **the kind of messaging that would be most effective** at getting employers to take action against the collection of illegal recruitment fees. To find out, the intervention tested three different message frames through a randomized control trial, using A/B testing. Three messages, each with a different frame, were sent to 7700 employers that had been randomized into three different groups. While formulated differently, **each message asked employers to speak to their domestic workers to find out if they have ever been charged illegal fees**. Employers were then asked to report on the results of their discussion. The design of each message and of the overall intervention was firmly rooted in scientific literature from the behavioural sciences. Two theories of encouraging “helping behaviour” were tested: 1) that people are more willing to help if it makes them feel good, or 2) they are more likely to help if it is somehow in their own self-interest.

A series of three experiments were conducted with this sample, embedding the message frames either into the body of the email, or into the subject line. In each experiment, employers were sent an email containing a call to action to ask their domestic worker if they had ever been charged recruitment fees above 10% of their first month’s wage. They were asked to click one of two response buttons: “Yes I will speak to my domestic worker today”, or “No, I will not take action”. Clicking on either link sent them to a survey page. Those who answered “No” were asked why they chose not to act. All participants were then brought to a survey, and asked a set of nine control questions. The final screen invited all participants to sign-up to a course on how to be better managers of domestic workers. A week later, they were sent a second email asking them to report back on their discussions.

SUBJECT LINES

Feel good” subject line: *“Help your domestic helper³ fight illegal fees”*

Neutral” subject line: *“Has an agency overcharged your helper?”*

Self-interest” subject line: *“Protect your home from illegal agencies”*

To measure impact of the messages, **we looked at open rates⁴, click rates⁵, the rates at which employers agreed to take the action or not, the rates of employers who agreed to sign-up to a course, and the number of employers who followed through on the call to action.** If employers opened an email, but did not click on any link, it showed us that the subject line worked, but that the content of the email was not sufficiently convincing. If they agreed to the action, but then didn't follow through, it told us the message was convincing, but that there remained a gap between their intentions and their behaviours. Moreover, if they agreed to take the action, but refused to sign up to the course, it told us how willing they would be to take further actions to improve the lives of their domestic workers.

RESULTS

Employers across all three groups were quite likely to open their email – in fact, around 30 per cent did so, which is considered high for an email marketing campaign. But while open rates were reasonably high, click rates dropped dramatically, and these findings were statistically significant. So while the right subject line can attract attention, it is not enough to encourage employers to engage, let alone commit to an action. That said, the vast majority of employers who clicked on a link, agreed to take the action; although this result was not statistically significant, it invites further research to confirm the finding.

But what motivated employers to open the email? The message that had the highest impact was a subject line that was designed to make employers “feel good” about themselves. Employers who were exposed to the “feel good” subject line were almost twice as likely to open the email as those in the control group. On the other hand, contrary to expectations, those exposed to the self-interest subject line were 0.7 times less likely to open the email.

IMPLICATIONS

What does this tell us about what motivates employers to act in favour of fair recruitment? The findings suggest that employers are more likely to help their domestic workers when they believe it will make them feel good to do so. In this case, the subject line they read was “Help your domestic helper fight illegal fees”. As such, the message frame evokes the vulnerability of the worker, and thus the higher position of the employer in the relationship. It suggests that, when employers show a willingness to help, they prefer to do so in a way that does not threaten their status in the relationship.

Ultimately, of the 7700 people to whom the email was sent, 25 employers agreed to speak to their domestic worker, and only one followed through by reporting back to the ILO the name of the agency that overcharged the worker. This suggests two challenges: first, that email has serious limitations to encouraging behaviour change; and second, that good intentions are not enough to see this action through. Employers may need a reminder, or more guidance as to how to start the conversation. They might benefit from more concrete tips or tools to strike up the dialogue. Or they might be more responsive when the request to act would come from a source of authority – like their own employer or a trusted friend.

³ Domestic helper is the terminology used in Hong Kong SAR legislation.

⁴ The “open rate” for an email campaign is a measure of how many recipients opened the email.

⁵ The “click rate” refers to the proportion of recipients who clicked on a specific hypertext link in the email to respond to particular questions.

NEXT STEPS FOR 2018

Engaging employers of domestic workers is a necessary step towards bringing social dialogue into the sector. Today, most employers of domestic workers do not see themselves as such, and they do not see the domestic workers as workers. Yet, ensuring fair recruitment and decent work for domestic workers is contingent on getting employers on board. Further steps are therefore necessary to increase employer engagement.

First, lessons learned from the HelperChoice intervention can be embedded in awareness raising campaigns. HelperChoice, and other companies committed to fair recruitment and that have communication channels with employers, can continue to serve as an entry point to raise awareness, and encourage social dialogue in the home. For instance, the most effective messaging might be adapted for use on the HelperChoice website, or in broader social marketing campaigns. Simple “how tos” might be issued to help walk employers through the steps of having a conversation with their domestic worker about illegal fees, and what to do if they find they have been overcharged.

New avenues should also be explored to increase response rates. For instance, employers might be more likely to reply and follow through if the request is coming from a source of authority (such as their own employer), or a trusted friend. To test this, a similar intervention will be carried out through an enterprise whose employees are likely to employ domestic workers. Using the context of the enterprise might also enable the use of different elements of the governance structure, as well as key influencers within the company, to strengthen the effects of the intervention.

Finally, an effective strategy to engage employers of domestic workers rests on the ability to reach them in large numbers. Further partnerships will thus be explored through organizations in which a high number of employers are likely to be found, such as through enterprises, professional trade unions, online platforms, or schools, to name a few.

Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS)

fundamentals@ilo.org

www.ilo.org/fundamentals

Inclusive Labour Markets, Labour Relations and Working Conditions Branch (INWORK)

inwork@ilo.org

www.ilo.org/inwork

www.ilo.org/domesticworkers

This pilot was conducted as part of ILO's Integrated Programme on Fair Recruitment (FAIR)