



# Reducing the mistreatment of migrant workers

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Millions of migrant workers leave their home countries each year in search of better opportunities, yet many face abuse, exploitation, and even violence behind closed doors. While improving and enforcing labour laws in destination countries is essential, such reforms are often difficult to achieve and enforce in practice, leaving many workers unprotected. So what can be done? This policy brief presents striking evidence from a randomised controlled trial involving nearly 2,000 Filipino domestic workers: a simple intervention – encouraging workers to share a personal photo and small gift with their employer – significantly reduced mistreatment. By humanising workers and reducing social distance, the intervention led to sizable declines in physical abuse and sexual harassment and improvements in worker conditions, even two years later. These findings highlight a powerful insight: even in highly constrained settings, small, scalable interventions can complement broader reforms can make a real difference improving migrant workers' lives.

International migration allows workers from low-income countries to increase their incomes substantially. By working in the US, for instance, the average low-skilled worker from a low- or middle-income country can expect to quadruple their real annual income (Clemens et al., 2019). These income gains easily exceed those from any development policy in countries of origin. By going abroad, migrant workers do not only help themselves. They send remittances to their family members in the countries of origin. Remittances have become an essential source of income in low- and middle-income countries. In 2023, remittances amounted to US\$ 669 billion, equivalent to more than three times the amount of official development assistance (World Bank, 2023).

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### **Migrant workers often face serious mistreatment abroad, with severe human and economic consequences**

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However, these massive economic gains from international migration come at a substantial risk for migrant workers. Many migrant workers face mistreatment and contract violations abroad. They may not get their salary on time or only with deductions. They may need to work much longer hours than agreed in the contract. They may face verbal, physical, or even sexual abuse. There is substantial concern that the social harms caused by the mistreatment and abuse of migrant workers reduce the economic gains from international labour migration. In the worst case, the social harms may even outweigh the economic gains. Migrants may regret their decision to migrate in hindsight, and potential migrants may be deterred from migration. Other than the first-order ethical importance, reducing the mistreatment of migrant workers thus also has economic implications.

### **What can be done?**

Policy approaches to reducing the mistreatment of migrant workers face significant challenges. In principle, governments of destination countries are responsible for enforcing laws and regulations that protect migrant workers. In practice, however, many destination-country governments do not prioritise the welfare of migrant workers. They are more accountable to employers who

may see no immediate benefits from such policies. At the same time, the governments most interested in protecting migrant workers – their countries of origin – cannot directly implement public policies in destination countries. Protecting migrant workers requires bilateral or multinational agreements between countries of origin and destination, which are challenging to secure and even more so to enforce.

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### **Reducing social distance between the employer and the migrant can be a scalable and cost-effective intervention to reduce mistreatment**

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One policy approach is to empower prospective migrant workers to find better employers. This approach often targets recruitment agencies that provide intermediary services to connect employers in destination countries with migrant workers in countries of origin. Two recent papers have shown that this approach can be effective. Informing prospective migrants about the quality of recruitment agencies in Indonesia (Bazzi et al., 2021) or introducing a rating system for recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka (Fernando & Singh, forthcoming) improved migrant workers' experience in the Gulf region and other parts of Asia. Such policies can also target migrants directly. For instance, informing Filipino migrant workers in Singapore about their legal rights and job-search strategies helped those in jobs with poor working conditions to find a new employer (Shrestha & Yang, 2019).

Another complementary policy approach is to improve the employer-worker relationship once a migrant worker has already signed a contract with a specific employer. There is less evidence of the effectiveness of this approach. In Barsbai et al. (forthcoming), we test one intervention that aims to reduce the mistreatment of domestic workers. Migrants who work for private households as domestic workers, primarily women, are considered especially vulnerable as they live in their employers' homes and are shielded from the public. Sometimes, employers confiscate their passports and phones, and do not even allow them to leave the house. If things go wrong, some domestic workers may hence be unable to reach out for help.

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**The experiment found that showing a simple family picture at the start of employment, improved working conditions and reduced the risk of violence even years later**

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Indeed, domestic workers face a high risk of mistreatment as Figure 1 shows. In our representative survey of domestic workers from the Philippines working in Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong, non-trivial shares reported not receiving their salary on time (36 percent in Saudi Arabia and 13 percent in Hong Kong), not having a weekly rest day as specified in the work contract (91 percent and 13 percent), experiencing physical violence (8 percent and 7 percent) or even sexual harassment (7 percent and 2 percent). In qualitative interviews, domestic workers complained about not feeling respected as human beings. Some even felt they were considered ‘slaves’ or ‘machines’.

### A humanising intervention

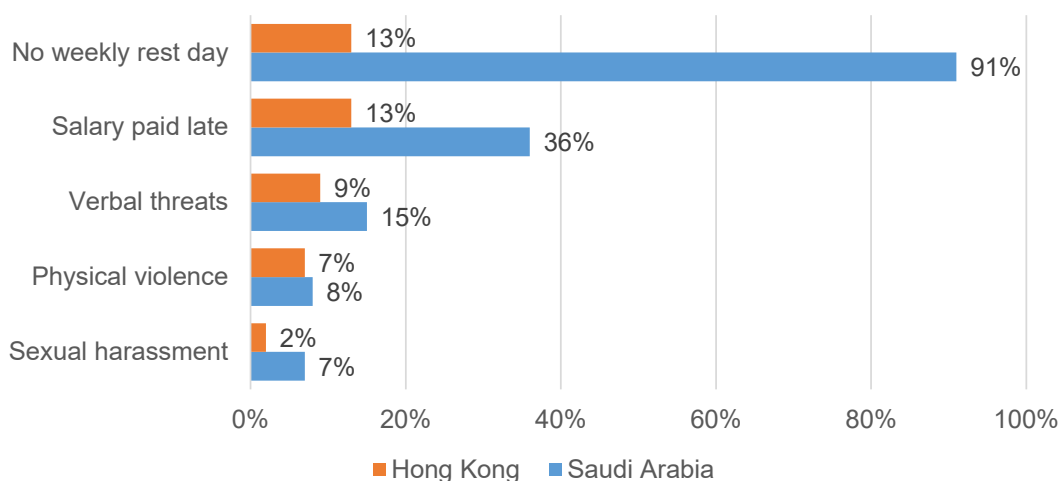
Together with the Philippine government, we designed a simple intervention that aims to reduce the mistreatment of migrant domestic workers. We encouraged

domestic workers to show their employers a photo of themselves and their immediate family members, typically including their children. The intervention also provided the migrant with a small gift, a pack of dried mangoes (a Filipino specialty). A traveler bringing a gift, most often food, is a Filipino tradition known as *pasalubong*. Presenting the small gift should act as a conversation opener, create a friendly atmosphere, and eventually allow the domestic worker to show the photo.

The intervention aims to reduce the social distance between the domestic worker and the employer during their initial encounter and create a more favourable relationship trajectory. In particular, the intervention aims to portray the domestic worker as a human being who comes with good intentions and has a family herself. It thereby tries to increase the moral cost of mistreating the domestic worker. The intervention builds on findings in behavioural economics that reducing the social distance between two parties increases prosocial behaviour and extends it to employer-worker relationships. Before the study, it was unclear whether previous findings from lab experiments apply to real-world relationships between employers and workers that are notably transactional in nature and involve cross-cultural encounters with large power asymmetries.

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**Figure 1 – Working conditions of domestic workers from the Philippines in Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia**



Notes: Data come from a representative survey with about 2,000 domestic workers interviewed in 2016 and 2017, about two years after starting their employment abroad (see Barsbai et al., forthcoming, for more details).

## The results

We evaluated the intervention in a randomised controlled trial with nearly 2,000 Filipino women newly departing for work as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong. Implementation happened in the context of the mandatory pre-departure orientation seminar of the Philippine government, which aims to prepare migrant workers for their jobs abroad. About half of the women were randomly assigned to the treatment group and encouraged to show a photo of their family to their new employer while offering a small gift.

Figure 2 shows that the intervention reduced the mistreatment of domestic workers by their employers, as revealed by several measures two years after the start of employment. For instance, in Hong Kong, domestic workers in the treatment group were 13

percent less likely to report being shouted at by their employers. They were 11 percent more likely to have been given enough food and 8 percent more likely to be allowed to leave the employer's house. In Saudi Arabia, where domestic workers generally face worse working conditions, the women were 47 percent less likely to be sexually harassed: 4 percent of workers in the treatment group reported sexual harassment vs. 7 percent in the control group who did not receive the intervention. They were 12 percent more likely to receive their salary on time and 21 percent more likely to extend their contract with the same employer. We also find that the intervention led the domestic workers' household members in the Philippines to have a more favourable view of international labour migration, thus affirming the domestic workers' assessment.

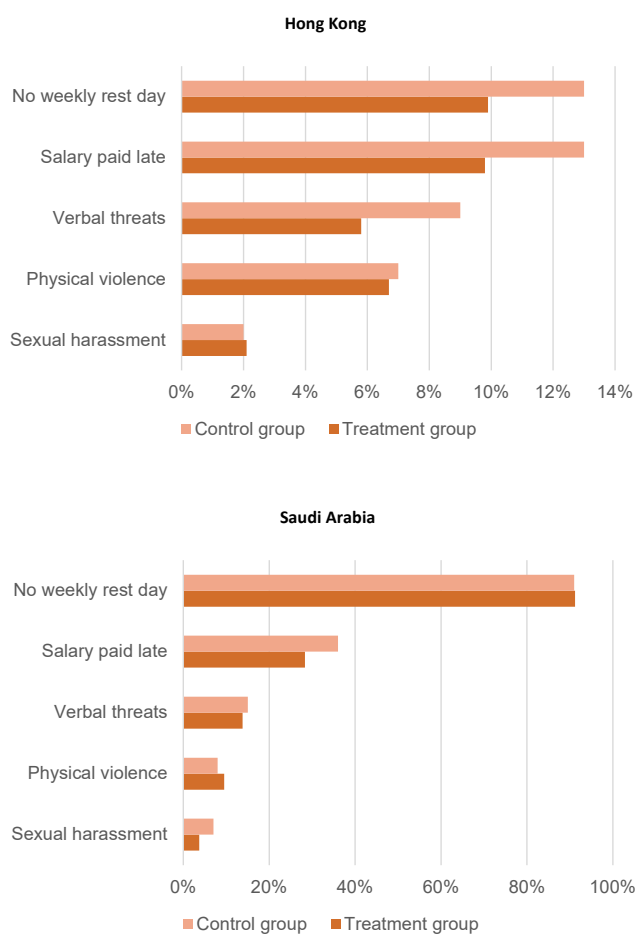
## Only part of the solution

Of course, this simple intervention cannot solve the problem alone. However, it helped migrant workers to reduce mistreatment and reap the economic gains from international labour migration. Compared to other approaches to improving the working conditions of migrants, the intervention does not require any public policy changes in destination countries. While the intervention can be facilitated by governments of countries of origin or NGOs, it can be implemented unilaterally by migrants due to its simplicity and negligible cost. This novel feature makes the intervention an attractive complementary policy option.

In principle, policies could and should also target employers directly. For example, increasing the salience of the details of the rights of migrant workers and the responsibilities of employers as specified in work contracts could be an alternative strategy. In a different context, Bertrand and Crépon (2021) document small and medium-sized firms' imperfect knowledge of labour laws in South Africa. Whether this approach is promising in the context of migrant workers, to whom governments of destination countries are arguably less accountable, remains to be tested.

However, it is important to stress that any individual-level intervention should not substitute for other system-wide policies designed to stop employers from mistreating migrant workers, in particular, legal protections for migrant workers in destination countries and their enforcement.

**Figure 2** – Effect of the intervention on the working conditions of domestic workers from the Philippines in Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia



Notes: See Barsbai et al., forthcoming, for more details.

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