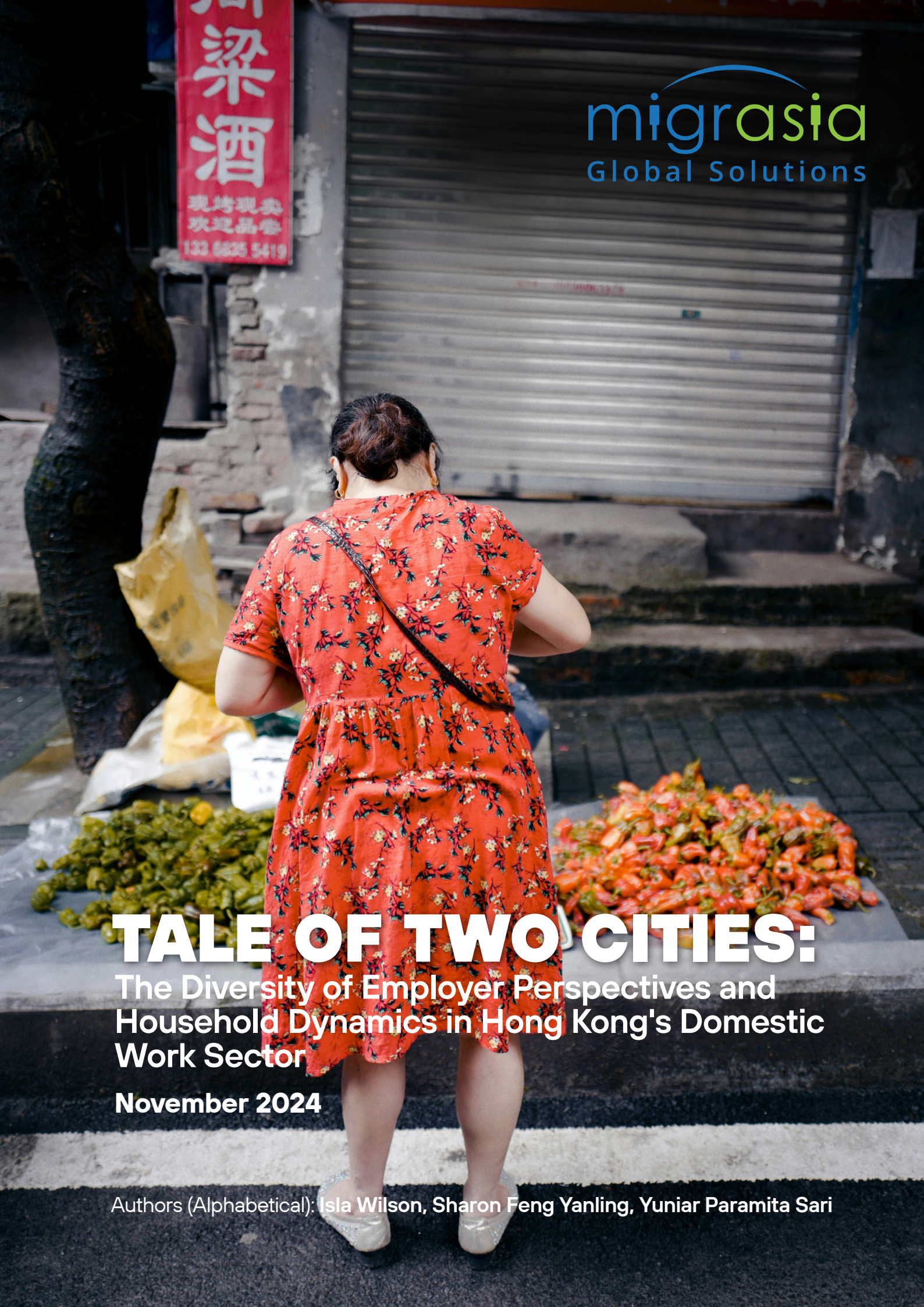

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TALE OF TWO CITIES:

The Diversity of Employer Perspectives and Household Dynamics in Hong Kong's Domestic Work Sector

November 2024

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Executive Summary

Since the 1970s, households in Hong Kong have employed migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to help with caregiving, cooking, and household responsibilities. Despite their valuable contribution, MDWs are vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation due to the informal, private, and poorly regulated nature of their working environments. Recent studies have shown that over 79% of Indonesian and Filipino MDWs in Hong Kong have experienced labour rights violations, and more than 56% work for more than 10 hours daily with limited rest (Seefar, 2019; IOM, 2023). Physical abuse affects approximately 25% of MDWs, while 17% report sexual molestation by employers (Ullah, 2015). Public perceptions often undermine their contributions, with media analysis showing portrayals that depict employers as victims and MDWs negatively, compounded by nationality-based stereotypes that depict MDWs in morally questionable roles (Ho & Sewell, 2023; Palmer, 2019; Pascoe & Tomassetti, 2024). Employer-employee relationships vary widely, from quasi-familial bonds to subjugation, influenced by cultural and socio-economic factors.

Despite extensive research on MDWs, there remains a critical gap in understanding employer perspectives. This report explores the social, cultural, and structural factors that shape employer attitudes and perceptions toward MDWs in Hong Kong and examines the current barriers to ethical employment. Understanding the motivations and beliefs behind employer behaviours—ranging from ethical and respectful to exploitative or abusive will offer valuable insights for reducing exploitation. The study findings will support behavioural change campaigns targeting employers, the general public, and MDWs, to improve working relationships and employment conditions.

The key findings of the study are as follows

Employer Profiles:

• Our sample of employers skewed towards middle-aged, female (71.6%) and married, primarily Hong Kong SAR nationals (61.1%) with high educational attainment. Income distribution skewed towards high-income households, earning over 100,000 HKD per household per month (45%).

• A composite indicator of exploitation indicates that 42.7% engaged in some type of exploitative practices - including threats, shouting, passport or phone retention, denial of rest day, requiring workers to sleep in a communal space or multiple forms of physical violence (5%).

• Employers reporting exploitation skewed towards males and were largely Hong Kong citizens (71%), and most commonly middle-income households earning between 60-000-99,999 HKD per month (31%) and living in apartments smaller than 752 square feet (49.6%).

Generalised Perceptions:

• Societal Contributions: The majority of employers perceive MDWs as vital to society, with 75% acknowledging their role in enabling families to thrive, supporting career advancement and caring for children and the elderly, especially among female respondents who reported stronger positive sentiments.

• Access to Resources: Attitudes towards resource sharing are divided: 27% of employers did not think MDWs should have access to the same social services as residents, and 20.9% oppose

equal opportunities, with exploitative employers significantly more likely to hold exclusionary views.

• Financial Concerns: About 30.1% of employers support increasing the minimum wage for MDWs, with women and 'ethical' employers more likely to favour wage increases. Exploitative employers were twice as likely to be concerned that MDWs' presence has led to higher taxation in Hong Kong (19.8%) and far more likely to oppose minimum wage increases (42%). One fifth (20%) of employers had the perception that MDWs borrow money without the intention to pay it back.

• Variations by Household Income: Employers' perceptions also vary significantly by income: low-income households are four times more likely to believe MDWs lie and steal, and are more likely to see them as uneducated and unreliable, whereas high-income households are 31% more supportive of wage increases and 20% more supportive of MDWs' accessing social services.

• Social Exclusion: The othering of MDWs as non-permanent residents may have contributed to societal reluctance to share public spaces – with employers expressing fears of services being overwhelmed, highlighting the paradox between MDWs' domestic necessity and contention around their public visibility.

• Discrimination: A minority of employers held discriminatory perceptions, as 16.3% viewed MDWs as mostly uneducated, and 14.1% reported that MDWs often lie and steal, with exploitative employers twice to three times as likely to agree. MDW ethnicity influenced stereotypes and may relate to exploitation: exploitative employers were twice as likely as ethical employers to view Indonesian MDWs as more obedient (21.4%) and Filipinos as flirtatious or promiscuous (19.8%).

Specific Attitudes:

• Gratitude & Workforce Participation: Roughly nine out of ten employers reported being grateful for their MDWs' contribution, reporting that MDWs eased their household burden (87.3%) and enabled them to dedicate more time to their career (83%), highlighting the importance of MDWs for workforce participation.

• Relationships: The large majority of employers held positive attitudes towards their MDWs, with a majority reporting good relationships (79.7%) and high levels of trust (72.9%), though exploitative employers were three times more likely to distrust their MDW (14.5%). A majority of respondents (65%) consider their MDW to be a part of their family, with little difference in attitudes between exploitative and ethical employers.

• Variations by Gender: Attitudes exhibited gender differences, as women were 24.7% more likely to strongly appreciate their MDWs and consider them as family, yet they also experienced higher levels of frustration with workers, possibly related to disproportionate managerial responsibilities.

• Varying Management Philosophies: Employers were divided on preferences for independent versus obedient workers, reflecting differing household management styles. Qualitative data further reveal concerns about resource limitations and risks of hiring MDWs, which intertwine financial anxieties with trust and power dynamics.

• Controlling Attitudes: Roughly a third of employers expressed controlling attitudes, with exploitative employers significantly more likely to think MDWs should focus on work and not their personal life (45.8%) and twice as likely to think MDWs should do whatever they are told to do (31.5%), reflecting a 'subjugating' employment style. Controlling attitudes may have been associated with negative experiences, as exploitative employers were 18% more likely to report that their MDW had caused them trouble or stress (39.7%).

• Social Norms: Perceived social norms may be related to employer attitude and behaviour, as ethical employers were 12% more likely to feel that most people they know have a good relationship with their MDW (64.6%).
• Stereotyping: Exploitative employers were twice as likely to stereotype workers by ethnic origin, such as viewing Filipinos as flirtatious and Indonesians as obedient, which may reinforce discriminatory attitudes.

Employment Practices:
• Compensation & Wages: The majority of employers reported that MDWs earned between HK$5,000-6,500 per month, with roughly a quarter paying closer to the current statutory minimum wage, while a small proportion (4.9%) paid below this legal threshold. A large majority of employers (79.2%) did, however, report giving MDWs gifts or bonuses, indicating increased remuneration associated with good performance.
• Flexible Management: Roughly three-quarters of employers reported adopting a flexible managerial approach, encouraging workers to engage in social interactions and manage their own schedule. Over 68% of employers even considered their MDWs as part of the family, with many developing close, quasi-familial bonds, and 50% often enquiring about their family life.
• Free Working Environment: Most employers allowed workers to access food freely in the household, and take a holiday each contract period (72%), while a majority also allowed MDWs to pursue skills or education courses (57.5%).
• Surveillance: MDWs may have lacked privacy, as 17.3% shared a room with a family member, while 4.6% slept in a communal space. A significant proportion of employers (39.9%) also had surveillance in their household. Exploitative employers were significantly more likely to report having surveillance cameras at home (52.7%).
• Restrictive Employment Practices: Other employers maintained hierarchical relationships with workers, adopting a strict managerial style and scolding, reprimanding, using threats or enacting punishments. Most commonly reported practices included limiting access to mobile phones (30.7%), restricting physical appearance (30%) and restricting MDWs from practising their religion (15.4%).
• Illegal employment practices, such as failing to buy health insurance for MDWs, which is legally mandatory (12.1%), and holding onto the passports of MDWs (11.4%), are still prevalent, violating Hong Kong law and exposing MDWs to rights violations.
• Gender and income influence employment practices: women were 15.7% more likely to oppose keeping passports for safety, and high-income households were 20% more likely to give bonuses and support MDWs' welfare. Middle and low-income households were more prone to some exploitative practices, such as restricting access to food and mobile phones.

Managing Conflict:
• Hypothetical Scenarios: Employers' responses to hypothetical conflict scenarios reveal a range of disciplinary practices, with 41% preferring to work out a repayment plan if contacted by a money lender regarding a loan, while 30% preferred to terminate the employment contract.
• Exploitative Response: Exploitative employers were significantly more likely to respond with verbal abuse (27.5%) and passport confiscation (19.7%). In other scenarios, they were also more likely to threaten their worker with a punishment (14.9%) or to use corporal punishment (11%).

• Skills and Communication Barriers: Tension often arose from perceived gaps in MDWs' skills and communication abilities, with employers attributing household conflicts to misunderstandings, language barriers, and insufficient training, which led to misinterpretation of instructions and unmet expectations.
• Work Ethic: Tensions frequently stemmed from perceived irresponsibility, slow work pace, poor initiative, and careless behaviour, including excessive phone use and forgetfulness.
• Trust and Serious Incidents: Conflict arose as a result of serious incidents such as property damage, borrowing money, theft, or dishonesty, leading to significant trust issues and exemplifying the structural and financial vulnerabilities of MDWs.
• Cultural Differences and Living Arrangements: Broader household relationships and cultural differences contributed to conflicts, with disagreements among family members, frustrations over shared space and hygiene and differing lifestyle expectations creating tensions.
• Conflict management strategies: varied among employers, with many initially seeking dialogue and understanding, while others justify harsh or punitive measures, including salary deductions, threats, or physical punishment, particularly among exploitative employers.
• Actual Violence in Response to Conflict: Employer-perpetrated violence and psychological aggression are prevalent: the survey indicates rates of physical violence (slapping 3.6%, punching 3.9%, beating 3.6%), while psychological abuse, including scolding (44.1%), shouting (35.3%), is more widespread, and disproportionately perpetrated by male employers.
• Gender differences exist, with men more likely to impose restrictions or engage in violence, and middle-income households (HKD 60,000–99,999) exhibiting higher rates of salary withholding (25%), passport retention, and verbal abuse—highlighting socio-economic influences on conflict dynamics.

Barriers & Challenges:
• Financial Barriers: Employers face complex barriers to ethical employment, with financial concerns being a primary factor; 42.6% report that hiring MDWs is expensive, and low-income households are disproportionately affected, struggling to support salaries and accommodation costs.
• Additional costs beyond wages, such as agency fees, flight expenses, and long service payments, create financial burdens for employers – especially for middle-class families. Some perceive salary increases as unjustified or inflationary pressures as excessive.
• Legal knowledge gaps are common; employers who exploit are 15% more likely to be unfamiliar with Hong Kong employment laws, and many rely heavily on employment agencies due to a limited understanding of their own legal responsibilities as employers.
• Employers often lack confidence in managing MDWs, especially regarding health, rights during pregnancy, and proper handling of crises, which can lead to restrictive or unjust employment practices.
• Mismatched expectations and trust issues contribute to exploitative practices; nearly half (48.8%) of exploitative employers report difficulties with MDWs' skills and work ethic, with higher reports of unmotivation, poor communication, and irresponsibility.
• Cultural differences, language barriers, and misunderstandings also hinder ethical employment, sometimes escalating to conflict or mistrust.
• Structural and systemic issues, such as the absence of probation periods, rigid immigration policies (“two-week rule”), and limited support resources, exacerbate employment challenges, making it harder to establish fair relationships.

• Employers criticise existing policies, such as the live-in rule, salary increases, and restrictions on MDWs' rights. Viewpoints diverged, with some employers lamenting rules tilted in favour of workers, while others viewed the employment system as morally problematic.
• Many suggest targeted improvements such as mandatory training for MDWs and employers, better educational and emergency resources, stricter regulation of employment agencies, and clearer rules.
• Employers advocated for financial aid such as tax relief, subsidised transportation, and food cards for MDWs to alleviate economic burdens and improve employment conditions.
• Finally, employers call for enhanced protections for both MDWs and themselves, including improved living conditions, safeguards against mistreatment, and support during crises, emphasising the need for proactive policy review to address systemic vulnerabilities.

The city's rhythm shaped by migrant domestic workers. © Photo by Thomas Chan - Unsplash

Section 1: Introduction

The existing literature on migrant domestic workers (MDWs) reveals a complex landscape shaped by historical, social, economic, and political factors. Research documents how MDWs face unique vulnerabilities stemming from their isolated workplace environments and uneven power dynamics with their employers (Sim 2003, Justice Centre Hong Kong 2016). Studies have identified alarmingly high rates of labour exploitation among Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, with over 79% experiencing some form of exploitation (Seefar, 2019). Other research highlights concerns about excessive working hours, with more than 56% of surveyed migrant workers working over 10 hours daily with limited rest periods (IOM, 2023). A 2015 study found that roughly a quarter of MDWs had been physically abused, while 17% had been sexually molested by their employers (Ullah, 2015).

Beyond these employment conditions, the existing literature also illuminates how public perceptions significantly impact MDWs' well-being and integration. Research by Tunon & Baruah (2012) demonstrates that negative public attitudes toward MDWs often contradict MDWs' actual economic and social contributions. These perceptions manifest in media representation and societal discourse, as Ho & Sewell (2023) found in their analysis of Chinese-language media that often portrays employers as victims while depicting MDWs in negative terms.

Attitudes toward MDWs are further complicated by nationality-based stereotypes. Palmer (2019) documents how Indonesian workers in Hong Kong face particular stereotypes from employment agencies, employers, and government officials. Chang & Ling (2010) note that Filipinas are frequently placed in morally questionable categories in cultural portrayals, while Indonesians have historically been viewed as Hong Kong's most "isolated and exploited" minority (Pascoe & Tomassetti 2024).

Moreover, the existing literature reveals that the relationship between employers and MDWs displays significant variation, ranging from what Ozeki (1997) describes as "quasi-familial bonds" to what Siu (2020) characterises as a "subjugation model." Constable (2017) cautions against defining employers as a monolithic group, noting substantial differences in attitudes and behaviours across employers with diverse backgrounds. This variation extends to treatment patterns, with Cheung & Mok (1998) finding that Western employers tend to offer more comfortable working environments to MDWs compared to their Chinese counterparts. Though the existing literature offers valuable insights, significant information gaps remain. The research therefore sought to understand the interaction of social, cultural and structural factors, with employer perceptions, attitudes and employment practices.

Research on MDWs frequently foregrounds MDWs as study participants, though interventions to improve employment relationships and worker conditions require further knowledge of the employer experience. To that end, this research sought to centre the perspectives of employers of domestic workers, to add to the literature on drivers of employment practices. Increased knowledge on the factors and attitudes that drive certain types of employer behaviour, from ethical to exploitative and even violent behaviours, will provide crucial insights for behaviour change. The study findings will directly inform social behavioural change campaigns targeting employers, the general public and MDWs, to improve employment relationships and reduce instances of exploitation.

The specific research objectives were to understand the perceptions and attitudes of employers of MDWs in Hong Kong and the drivers of their behaviour, as well as to identify the factors and barriers that hinder ethical employment practices.

To that end, the study's research questions were as follows:

a). What are the factors (societal norms, cultural, structural, and economic) that influence employers' perceptions of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong?
b). To what extent do these factors influence employers' attitudes, both positive and negative, towards migrant domestic workers
c). To what extent do the prevalent factors and attitudes influence the employment practices, both positive and negative, of employers of migrant domestic workers?
d). How do employers justify their employment practices or behaviours?
What are the factors and barriers that are hindering ethical employment practices among employers?

Routine tasks reflect dignity in unseen labor. © Photo by Kevin Malik - Pexels

Section 2: Methodology

2.1. Overview of the Methodology

The study utilised a multi-method approach, encompassing secondary and primary data collection. Before primary data collection, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to understand public perceptions about migrant workers, attitudes, behaviours and employment relationships and practices both regionally and in Hong Kong specifically. A review of relevant theoretical foundations and methodologies for social and behavioural change was conducted to ground the research within existing literature. Based on themes identified during the literature review phase, the survey tool and in-depth interview guides were constructed to measure perceptions, attitudes and relevant factors influencing employment relationships between Hong Kong employers and MDWs.

2.2. Primary Data Collection

Primary data collection employed a mixed-method approach, comprising a survey of employers of MDWs in Hong Kong and follow-up semi-structured interviews with employers.

a). Survey of Employers of Migrant Domestic Workers

To understand the perceptions and attitudes of employers of MDWs in Hong Kong, a survey of 306 MDW employers was conducted. A simple random sampling approach was used to identify employers for inclusion within the survey, via Foreign Domestic Helper (FDH) employment agencies in Hong Kong. The sampling frame was a comprehensive list of 1,694 employment agencies from which a random sample of 500 employment agencies was drawn. Enumerators attempted to contact employment agencies to recruit them to disseminate the 15-minute online survey to their clientele. The team worked on refusal conversion for employment agencies, by contacting them via various channels, including phone, email and via in-person visits, to reduce bias within the sample. All survey participants received a small incentive for their participation, and the online survey was available in both English and Cantonese.

b). Semi-structured Interviews with Employers of Migrant Domestic Workers

A purposive sampling approach was utilised to select participants for follow-up in-depth interviews, based on a consideration of demographic data, socio-economic factors and responses to the survey questionnaire. In total, 15 employers were selected for in-depth interviews. Both participants who reported overwhelmingly positive migrant sentiment and ethical practices, as well as those who reported negative sentiment, exploitative practices and violence, were selected for interview to allow for comparison between groups. The qualitative data collection comprised in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom in both English and Cantonese. Enumerators were trained on conducting sensitive interviews as well as navigating discussions around violence perpetration before data collection.

2.3. Data Analysis

For survey data, descriptive and bivariate analysis were conducted to provide an overview of employers, including key demographics and any group differences based on income, gender

and employer nationality. Differences between employers who reported more ethical behaviour and those who reported exploitative and violent behaviour were considered in the analysis. The analysis provided an overview of employer demographics, migrant sentiment, attitudes towards domestic workers, employment practices, conflict management, violence, challenges and barriers.

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse qualitative data. We adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) method for conducting thematic analysis, which includes familiarising with the data; developing an initial list of codes; finding, reviewing and defining key themes; and writing up the findings. All interviews were transcribed via Zoom, and enumerators reviewed audio files and conducted data-checking and translation into English. Interviewers also triangulated transcriptions with notes taken during interviews and observations. Interview transcriptions and notes were coded, and a thematic map was created to reveal the findings.

2.4. Challenges and Limitations

The subject of the research, particularly questions on violence and exploitation, was sensitive, which posed challenges for participant recruitment. To mitigate this, we offered participants incentives for their participation and recruited through a variety of channels, selecting a larger sample of employment agencies which accommodated a higher refusal rate. Considering that employers source migrant workers from a diverse range of places, we did not solely rely on employment agencies but also recruited through social media, employer networks and through institutions such as schools and Universities. Another challenge was securing honest responses from employers, particularly relating to sensitive questions. To mitigate this, we included a data quality measure within the survey to monitor random responses and invited survey respondents for follow-up interviews. We faced challenges converting employers who reported violence for in-depth interviews. For those whom we did recruit, enumerators were trained on probing questions to encourage employers to share freely. Despite this, exploitation and violence were likely still under-reported.

2.5. Research Ethics

We obtained formal ethics approval from the University of Hong Kong Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Reference Number: EA240542) to conduct both stages of this research. Informed consent was completed before the survey and interviews to ensure research participants understood the study context, had access to relevant resources and information and that their participation was voluntary. We also trained enumerators and interviewers on conducting sensitive research to minimise the harm and created emotionally safe spaces for employers to share their experiences.

Moments of connection within Hong Kong's crowded spaces. © Photo by Catgirlmutant - Unsplash

Section 3: Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Labelling Theory

The social process of classifying people, called labelling, has powerful social repercussions (Becker, 1963). Labelling Theory can be applied to analyse how societal and media labels perpetuate the marginalisation of migrant communities. Studies have found that negative media portrayals amplify hostility toward migrants, with terms like "undocumented" or "illegal" heightening prejudice and support for punitive policies (Rucker, Murphy & Quintanilla 2019). When migrant workers are labelled as inferior, a different set of rules applies to them, which has consequences for their treatment by society at large. Factors of race, class and nationality intersect to determine how migrant workers are labelled within society. The labelling process reinforces societal prejudices and may encourage employers to find in migrant workers what they expect to see. This is most clearly demonstrated in the semantic decision on the part of the Hong Kong government to term migrant domestic workers as "foreign domestic helpers," which emphasises their difference and devalues their work, subjugating them to other local "workers". This study seeks to explore how the labels or stereotypes that employers have about migrant workers, reflected in their attitudes, relate to how they treat the MDWs in their households. We identified such labels within the existing literature and included them within the survey as opinion statements to better understand how they relate to employer behaviour.

3.2. Neutralisation Theory

The research is particularly interested in exploitative and violent behaviours, and in understanding how employers justify this type of behaviour. To address this question, the research draws upon neutralisation theory, which explains deviant behaviour, or how offenders justify or rationalise their behaviour by convincing themselves that committing a crime is acceptable (Sutherland 1941). Deviant acts carry with them guilt or shame, and so those who participate in deviant behaviour find ways to neutralise this guilt to protect their self-image. Sykes & Matza (1957) outlined various neutralisation techniques, among which are: **denial of responsibility; denial of injury;** and **denial of the victim**, each of which may be applicable in the context of violence perpetrated towards MDWs in Hong Kong. Socio-economic or cultural circumstances may lead an employer to **deny responsibility** for their behaviour, as they may perceive themselves to be the victim of unfavourable social conditions or circumstances which led to their behaviour. This socio-cultural context may also lead the employer to **deny injury**, downplaying the harm of their actions, or to **deny the victim**, by asserting that the victim deserved the behaviour or that it was an appropriate response to the circumstances.

Discrimination based on race, class, national origin or immigrant status may justify the denial of harm to migrant victims. Harmful stereotypes, outlined above in the section on "labelling", may reinforce the belief that certain exploitative behaviour is deserved. This relates to the labelling of migrant workers in society, which may justify an employer's ability to deny the victim and deny responsibility for their actions. Cultural depictions of migrant workers and the normalisation of certain behaviours towards them create a culture of non-interference in Hong Kong, which lowers people's threshold for violence and insulates those who commit the most egregious forms of violence. In this sense, the broader Hong Kong society may be colluding in neutralising

the behaviours of exploitative employers. Employers are thus more likely to engage in deviant behaviour if this wrongdoing is justified as acceptable. The behaviour of friends, peers and the wider society is extremely important in determining what behaviours are considered acceptable. In exploring the relationship between harmful attitudes and harmful behaviours, the survey seeks to shed light on this phenomenon.

3.3. Theory of Planned Behaviour

As the findings of the research will inform a social and behavioural change campaign, the study design considered a theoretical framework of behaviour change, namely Azjen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour. The theory posits that intentions capture motivation for engaging in a certain behaviour, and that the stronger an intention is, the more likely it is that someone will perform the behaviour. Intentions are, in turn, determined by three variables: 1) An individual's attitude toward a behaviour or the extent to which they have a favourable appraisal of the behaviour; 2) Subjective norms or the extent of social pressure to perform a given behaviour; and 3) Perceived behavioural control or the perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour.

For the benefit of future behaviour change interventions, the study sought to measure some of these variables, including employers' attitudes towards certain ethical or unethical employment behaviours. Our appraisal of employment behaviours was informed by a combination of Hong Kong Employment Law as it relates to MDWs and ILO's indicators of forced labour (ILO 2012), and included measures such as: various forms of physical violence, verbal abuse and threats, excessive overtime, restriction of movement, retention of identity documents or personal items, abusive living conditions, excessive overtime and salary deduction, among other measures. Within perception and attitudes scales, we also incorporated measures of how employers perceived the attitudes of others in the wider society (e.g. family, friends, HK population broadly) to provide insight into subjective norms related to MDWs. Finally, we sought to measure other factors that could constrain behaviour, such as income or work-related stress, to provide insight into perceived behavioural control. The incorporation of these measures will provide some insight into employers' intentions, which are related to their employment behaviour, providing focus areas for a follow-up behaviour change campaign.

Behind each window, a story of care and belonging. © Photo by Billow962 - Unsplash

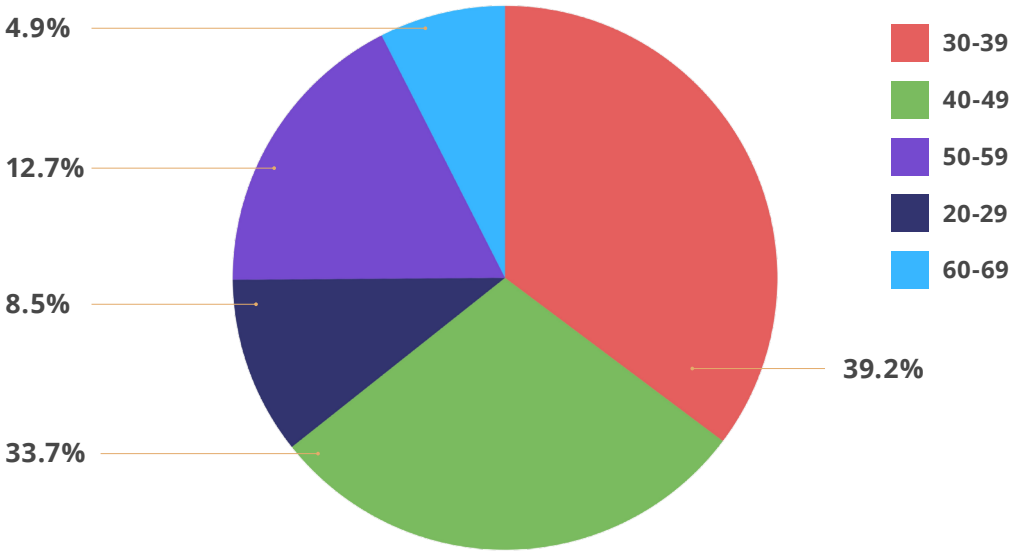
Section 4: Findings & Analysis

4.1. Demographics of Employers

4.1.1. Employer Demographics: Surveys

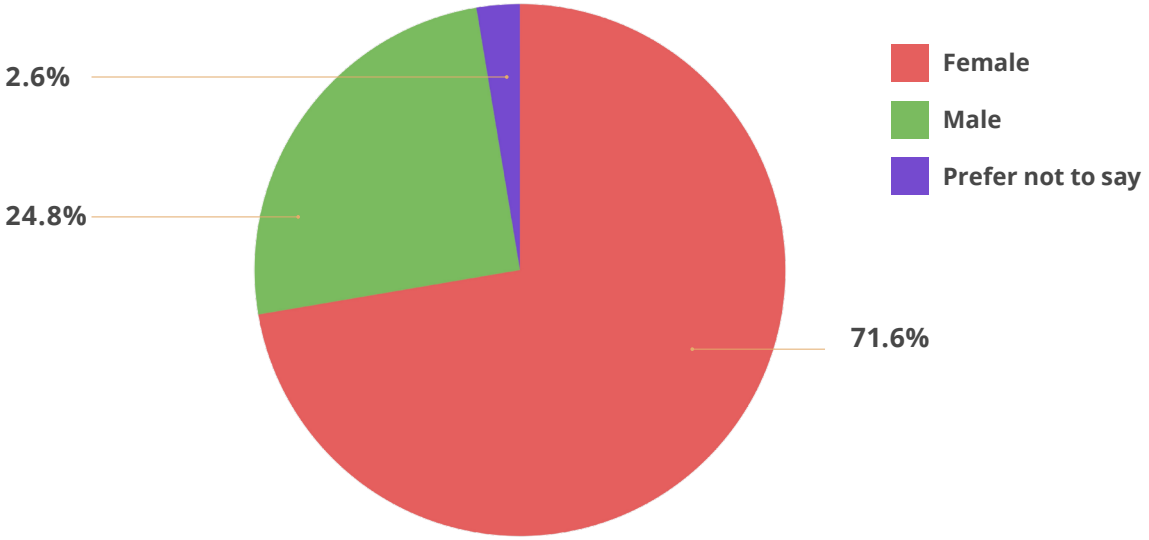
The sample of employers reveals a demographic profile dominated by middle-aged, married, employed, and well-educated individuals. **Figure 1** outlines the age demographics of survey respondents, a majority of whom (72.9%) were between 30-49 years of age.

Figure 1: Employer Age Groups



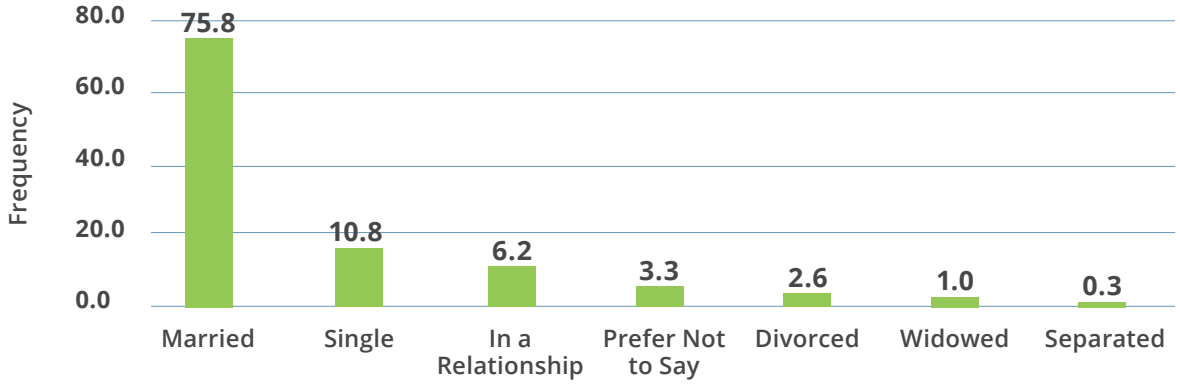
There is a pronounced gender imbalance among the sample of employers, with females constituting 71.6% of survey respondents compared to just 24.8% males **(Figure 2)**.

Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Employers



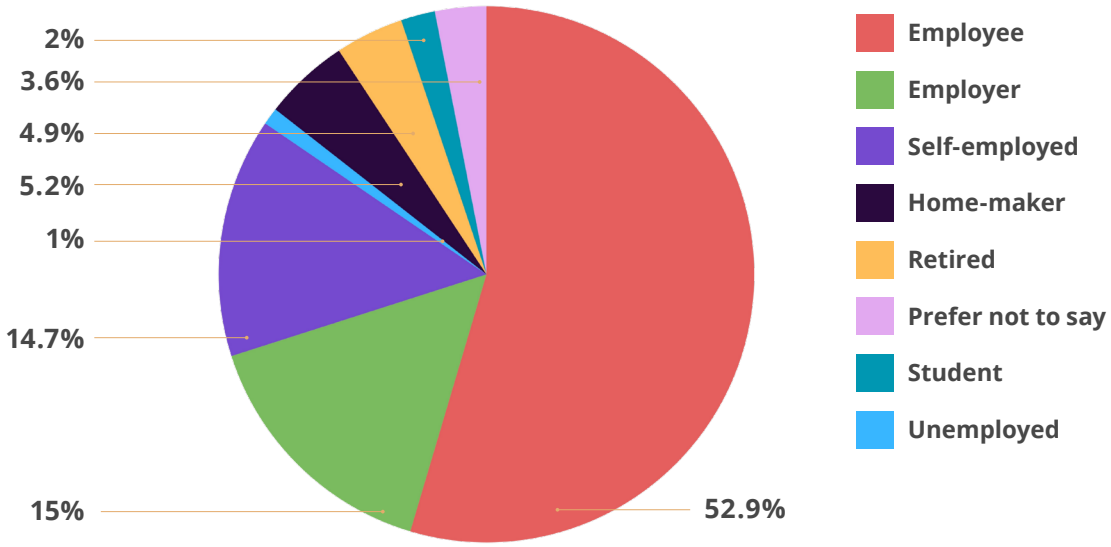
Marital status data show that three-quarters (75.8%) of respondents are married, while smaller proportions are single (10.8%) or in relationships (6.2%) **(Figure 3)**.

Figure 3: Marital Status of Employers (%)



Survey respondents reported their employment status. While employers of MDWs, most participants are also employees working for others (52.9%), while smaller segments are employers (15.0%) or self-employed (14.7%) **(Figure 4)**. Males were more than three times more likely than females to report being an employer (32.9%), while women reported higher rates of self-employment (16.9%) or doing unpaid family care work (9.1%).

Figure 4: Employment Status of Employers

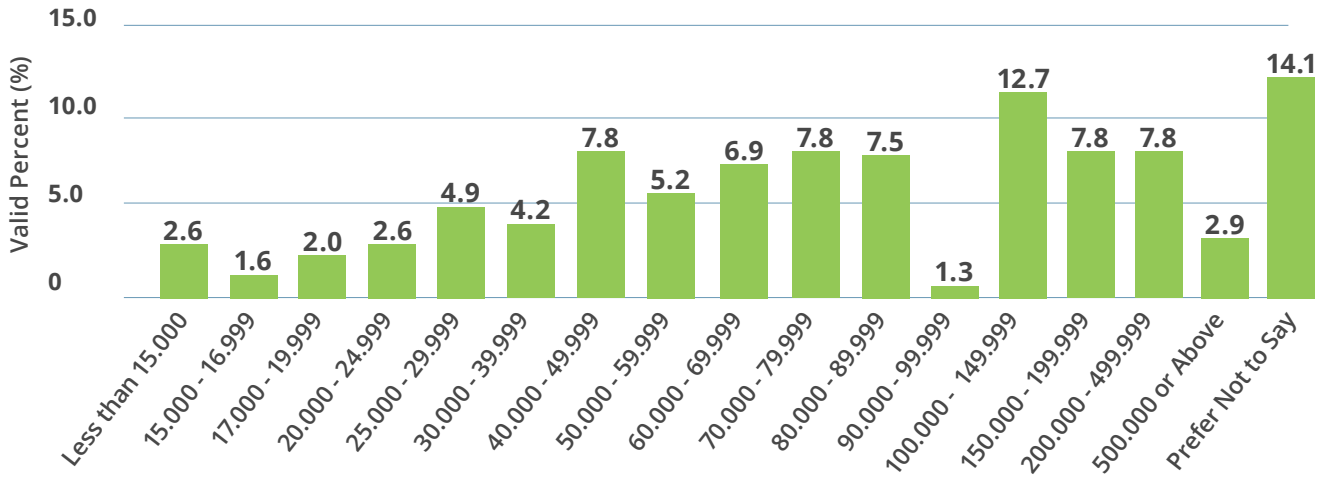


Our sample's income distribution skewed towards high-income employers **(Figure 5)**, with the largest proportion **(24.8%)** reporting a monthly household income of between 200,000-500,000+ HKD, followed by 60,000-99,999 HKD **(23.5%)**. For the purposes of comparison of study findings across income groups, we categorised employers into 5 income brackets (Table 1). It is worth noting that our definition of "low-income" actually falls within the range of lower-middle income as defined by the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department.[1] However, our categories reflect income within the population of employers of MDWs in Hong Kong, who likely have higher earnings than the general population.

Table 1: Income Brackets

	Income Bracket	Monthly Household Income (HKD)	Proportion of Sample (%)
1	Low Income	> 15,000-24,999	8.8
2	Low-Middle Income	25,000-59,999	22.2
3	Middle Income	60,000-99,999	23.5
4	High-Middle Income	100,000-199,999	20.6
5	High Income	200,000+	24.8

Figure 5: Household Income of Employers



[1] In Hong Kong, low-income households are generally defined as those with a monthly household income at or below the 20th percentile (P20) of the overall income distribution. In 2021, this threshold was approximately HK$10,000 or below. Lower-middle-income households are those with monthly income above HK$10,000 but not exceeding HK$20,300, which is roughly the 40th percentile (P40). https://app7.legco.gov.hk/rpdb/en/uploads/2023/RB/RB02_2023_20230804_en.pdf

Nationality data indicate that Hong Kong SAR nationals comprise the majority **(61.1%)** of employers **(Figure 6)**, with other significant groups coming from India **(6.9%)**, the United Kingdom **(6.2%)**, and Australia **(5.2%)**.

Figure 6: Nationality of Employers

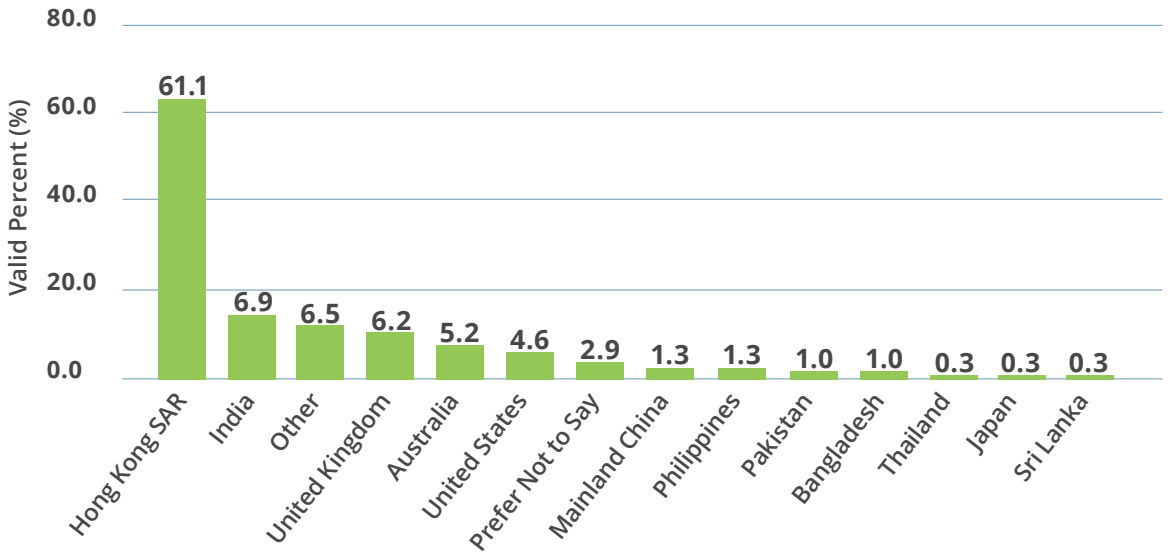
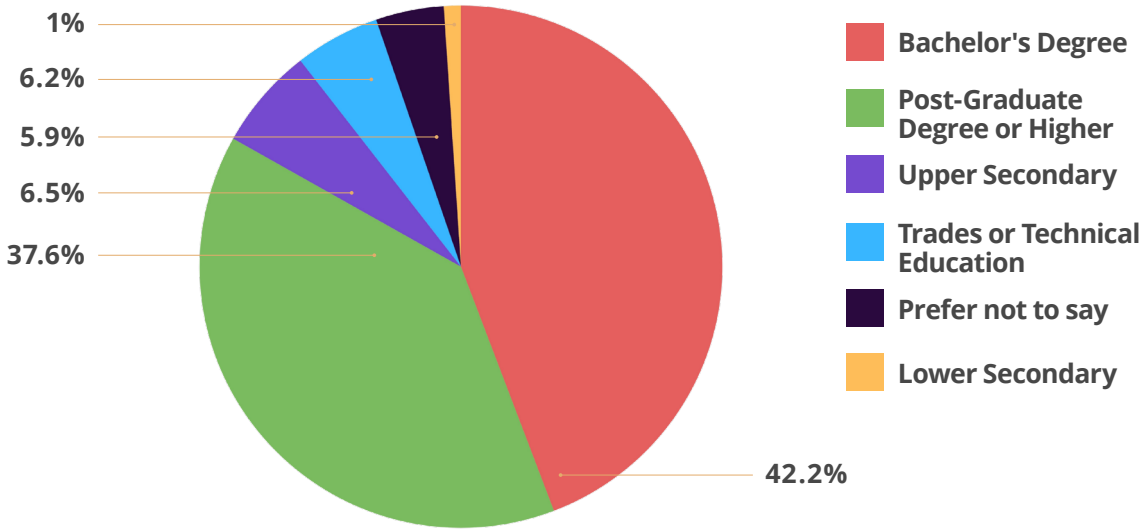


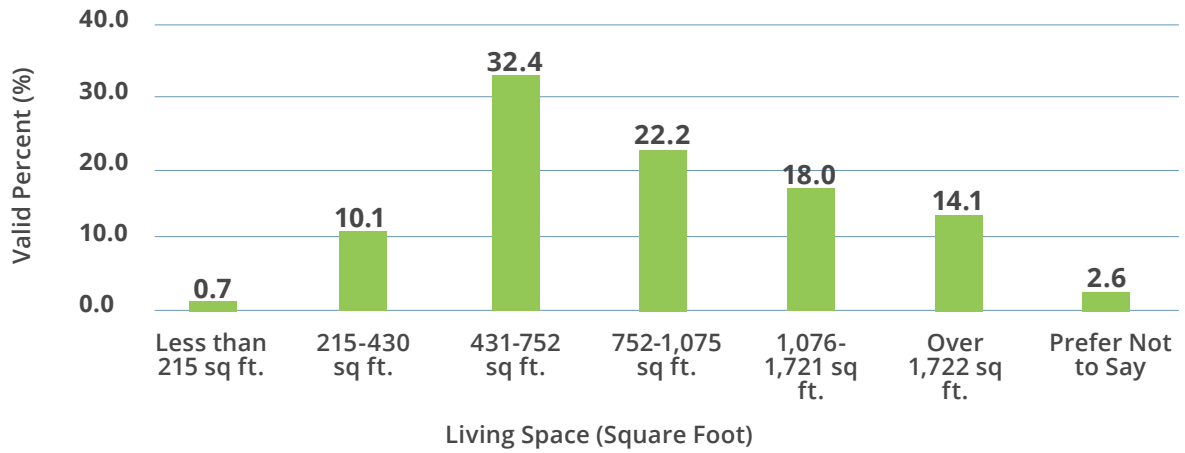
Figure 7: Education Levels of Employers



The education level of survey respondents is notably high, with **79.8%** holding tertiary qualifications—**42.2%** with Bachelor's degrees and **37.6%** with Postgraduate degrees or higher **(Figure 7)**.

Finally, household composition analysis reveals that most employers live in households of 3-4 members **(66.0%)**, with **62.0%** having 1-2 children under 18 years old. Most of the employers' households **(73.2%)** do not include elderly members aged 65 or above. As Figure 8 indicates, the most commonly reported apartment size was between 431-752 square feet, though a large proportion of the sample had larger living spaces **(Figure 8)**.

Figure 8: Size of Employers Living Space



4.1.2. Employer Demographics: Qualitative

The qualitative analysis of 15 employer interviews highlighted diverse demographics. Participants ranged from under 30 to 59 years old, with most being middle-aged. The majority were male (66.7%) and married (73.3%), with others in relationships or undisclosed. Employment statuses included company employees (40%), business owners with staff (26.7%), self-employed, students, and unemployed. Most interviewees employed Filipino domestic workers (60%), with the rest employing MDWs of Indonesian origin. Household incomes varied widely, from below 20,000 HKD per month to over 150,000 HKD per month. Educational backgrounds ranged from technical qualifications to postgraduate degrees, with over half holding bachelor's degrees. Housing sizes ranged from about 215 to over 1,700 square feet, accommodating between 2 and 6 household members.

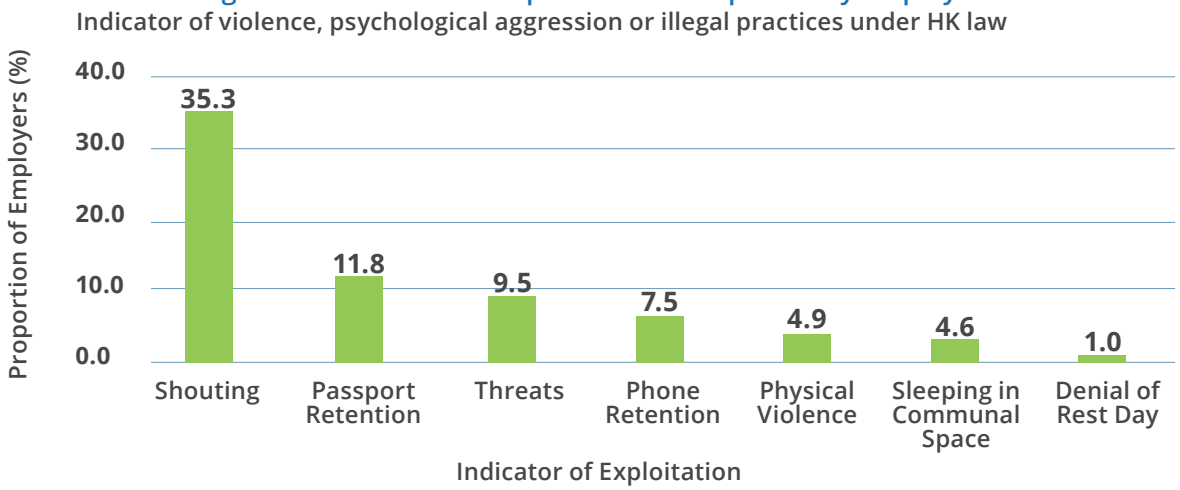
4.1.3. Exploitative vs Ethical Employers

To compare the characteristics, perceptions and attitudes of employers engaging in different types of employment behaviours, during the analysis phase, we created a composite indicator of exploitative employment practices. This indicator was created by combining 12 different questions, which pointed to labour exploitation, according to ILO forced labour indicators, and/or violence, according to Straus's Conflict Tactic Scale. The composite indicator includes self-reported measures of threats, shouting, confiscation of mobile phone and passport, denial of rest day, requiring domestic workers to sleep in a communal space and physical violence (slapping, punching, kicking, beating, hitting with something, throwing something at, pushing, grabbing or shoving). Of the survey sample, **42.8%** of respondents reported at least one of these behaviours and so are considered to represent employers engaging in exploitative employment practices

[2] These particular indicators were selected as they represent psychological aggression, violence, or illegal practices under Hong Kong law. While other indicators may have been unethical they might not have met the threshold for illegality representing a measure of exploitation.

(Figure 9).[2] The remaining **67.2%** did not report any of these exploitative or violent behaviours and so represented employers engaging in more ethical employment practices. By comparing the responses of these two groups, the study aims to shed light on the diverse characteristics and attitudes of employers who engage in exploitative behaviour and those who do not.

Figure 9: Indicators of Exploitation as Reported by Employers

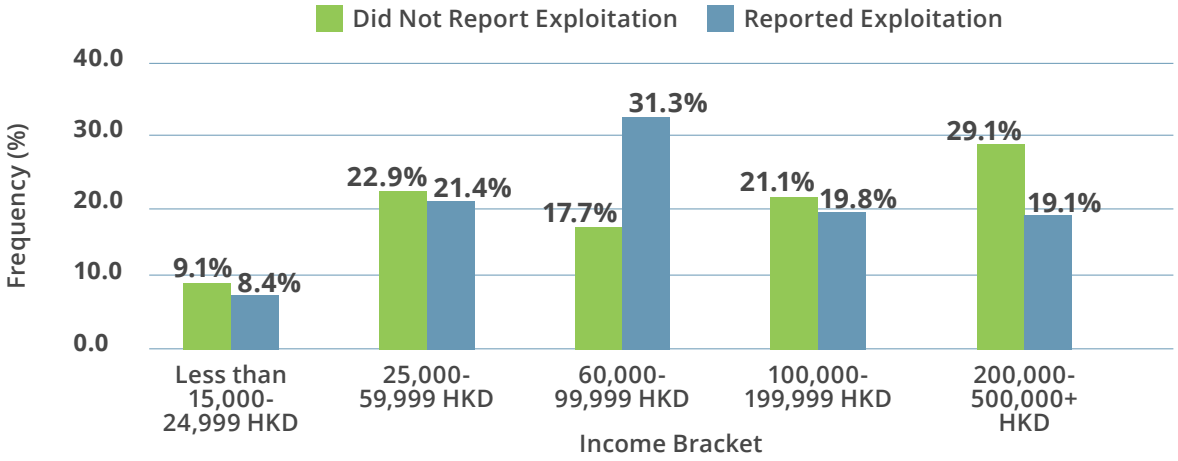


4.1.4. Demographics of Employers Reporting Exploitation

While only a minority of our sample of employers were male (24.8%), the data indicate that a larger proportion of employers reporting exploitation were male (31.3%). There were no major differences in the employment status of employers that reported exploitation, most of whom were employees (52.9%). Educational backgrounds were also similar between these two groups, although 'ethical' employers were marginally more likely to have a post-graduate education.

The large majority of employers reporting exploitation were Hong Kong citizens (71%), who represented only 53.7% of "ethical" employers. The next largest country of origin for employers reporting exploitation was India (9.9%), followed by the United Kingdom (4.6%). There were no major differences in the number of household members between employers who reported exploitation and those who did not. However, employers who reported exploitation were marginally more likely to have elderly members in their household. Employers who reported exploitation might have had slightly higher rates of employing Indian, Nepalese and Indonesian domestic workers, although Filipino domestic workers still made up the majority (66.4%).

Figure 10: Employers Reporting Exploitation by Income Bracket (%)



Additionally, middle-income households were most likely to report exploitation, as roughly a third **(31.3%)** of exploitative employers had a monthly household income of 60,000-99,999 HKD (Figure 10). Low-middle-income households were the second most likely to report exploitation, followed by high-middle-income households. This indicates a potential relationship between income bracket and exploitation, with further investigation needed. Having a smaller living space may also be related to exploitation, as ethical employers had comparatively bigger living spaces. Roughly a third **(36.6%)** had apartments over 1,075 square feet, while nearly half **(49.6%)** of those reporting exploitation had apartments smaller than 752 square feet. This calls into question the relationship between higher financial stability and more ethical behaviour.

While existing literature offers insights into the experiences of MDWs in Hong Kong, there has been a notable gap in research documenting the demographic profile of employers who engage in exploitative practices. By creating a composite indicator of exploitation and analysing the characteristics of these employers, our study contributes novel insights into the demographics of unethical employers and provides crucial data for targeted interventions aimed at reducing exploitation.

4.2. Employer Perceptions of Domestic Workers

4.2.1. MDWs as Essential to HK Economy and Society

In order to measure employers' perceptions of MDWs, a perception scale was included in the survey. The scale was informed by the validated Positive and Negative Perception of Immigrants Scale (PANPIS) to measure immigrant sentiment, while adapting the questions to the local context. A majority of employers saw MDWs as valuable to Hong Kong society, as roughly **75%** of respondents reported that MDWs allowed families in Hong Kong to thrive and advance in their careers and that they took good care of children and the elderly. A majority also felt that MDWs add to the cultural diversity of Hong Kong **(69.3%)**. The data indicated some gendered differences in perceptions of MDWs. Women respondents tended to report stronger positive sentiment towards MDWs. Women were more likely than men to strongly agree that MDWs allow families in Hong Kong to thrive, allow parents to advance in their careers and take good care of children and the elderly.

During interviews, employers described the contributions that MDWs made to their lives. Six employers mentioned that the presence of MDWs eased the burden on families in Hong Kong, providing opportunities for locals and particularly women to pursue careers and increase their household income. This aligns with Cheung (2022)'s research finding about the benefits employers perceive from MDWs' presence.

> *"I think foreign domestic helpers are a necessity for many families. They are essential and play an important role. Without them, you might have hundreds of thousands of families with only one person able to work."* ***(interview #7)***

"They enable women to go to work. More women can pursue their education and careers, and they can shine in their work. Can we say the status of women in Hong Kong has improved, in terms of their earning ability?" ***(interview #11)***

Some employers noted that MDWs have integrated well and are an integral part of Hong Kong society.

"I think most domestic workers have integrated into Hong Kong society. I see many Filipino workers on the streets on weekends; they are somewhat part of the community, and we might view them as half Hong Kong residents." ***(interview #13)***

These positive perceptions provide a counterpoint to the stereotypes documented by Ho & Sewell (2023), who identified negative characterisations of MDWs in Hong Kong as "personal possessions" or "lowly maids," identifying the commodification of MDWs as symbols of status and wealth, and associations with historical servant roles like "muijai" and "amahs."

4.2.2. Concerns Around Resource Sharing, Finances & Income

a). Resource Sharing

When it came to opinions about sharing societal resources with MDWs, employers were more split. The data indicate that **27%** of employers disagreed or strongly disagreed that MDWs should have access to the same social services as residents, and roughly a fifth **(20.9%)** did not think they should have the same opportunities. Perceptions around domestic workers' impact on resource scarcity in Hong Kong may be related to exploitation, as employers who exploited their domestic workers were **12.8%** more likely to disagree that domestic workers should have access to the same resources as Hong Kong residents. Employers reporting exploitation were also twice as likely to think that the presence of domestic workers in Hong Kong has led to higher taxation (**19.8%** compared to **8.6%**) **(Figure 11)**. The findings also reveal some gender dimensions, as men were twice as likely as women to feel that MDWs have driven up taxes, while women felt more strongly that MDWs should have access to the same social services. These attitudes reflect broader exclusionary social practices documented by existing literature, such as MDWs being "explicitly excluded from statutory minimum wage provisions" (Liang 2016) and other labour protections.

b). Minimum Wage Discussions & Financial Burdens

A substantial proportion of employers, however, felt that MDWs may deserve better remuneration for their work, as **30.1%** reportedly agreed that the minimum allowable wage for domestic workers should be increased. 'Ethical' employers were more supportive of minimum wage increases, while 42% of employers reporting exploitation were not in favour. Women also showed more support than men for an increase in the MDW minimum wage. These findings suggest a nuanced picture, challenging the literature and highlighting that employers recognise wage inequities in Hong Kong society.

Qualitative interviews revealed that some employers consider domestic workers as a drain on financial resources in Hong Kong. One employer argued that domestic worker wages are

[3] This estimate is based on a 2023 IOM Research Report (Link), considering the average number of hours worked for 86% of MDW respondents between 10-16 hours per day, and considering the current Minimum Allowable Wage of HK$4,990 per month.

significant considering the purchasing power within their home countries, and as a result, they should contribute to local taxation in Hong Kong.

"I think they're bringing a very negative impact to the Hong Kong labour force. So I feel that 5,000 HKD is a lot of money for her home country. The Government does not benefit from this helper, because they send all their money back to their home country. Unlike Singapore and the UAE, where they tax the helper's salary." ***(interview #12)***

In considering this view, it is worth noting that the minimum allowable wage for domestic workers is significantly lower than that of the general population in Hong Kong, estimated at between $10-20 HKD per hour, compared to the local minimum wage of $40 HKD per hour.[3]

c). Relationship between Income & Perceptions

Employers' perceptions vary significantly across income groups. Low-income households are four times more likely than high-income households to believe that MDWs often lie and steal, and they are twice as likely to think MDWs can carry unknown diseases. They were also more likely to view MDWs as uneducated and to see them as unreliable or a waste of money. Middle-income households are the least supportive of MDWs having the same opportunities as locals, followed by low and lower-middle income households. In contrast, high-income households are **20%** more likely to support MDWs' access to social services and to believe MDWs contribute to Hong Kong's cultural diversity. Additionally, high-income households are **31%** more likely to advocate for increasing the minimum wage for MDWs. These findings highlight a clear association between income level and perceptions, with high-income employers generally demonstrating more positive and supportive perspectives.

d). Money Lending Concerns

Excessive borrowing by MDWs, widely covered in the news, was inserted into the survey to understand if these reports or personal experiences influence employer sentiment. The data indicate that a fifth of employers **(20%)** agreed that MDWs "often borrow money without the intention to pay it back." Employers during qualitative interviews also revealed negative perceptions about MDWs in relation to the practice of borrowing money. Lending practices of MDWs clearly influence public sentiment.

"Almost every helper has this tendency. I think there's not a single one on this planet who might not have one, at least in Hong Kong. That's why there are so many finance companies." ***(interview #12)***

Existing literature widely documents MDWs' vulnerability to debt bondage and social and financial exploitation (Constable 2015). MDWs in Hong Kong often face significant financial challenges and excessive recruitment fees, which may lead them to borrow money from unethical money lenders who grant excessive interest loans. The money lending industry in Hong Kong often preys upon low-income earners, although the local population may not be aware of this. Rather, one employer suggested that the finance companies exist because of the irresponsible lending practices of domestic workers, not the other way around.

4.2.3. Concerns about Sharing Public Space & Public Gathering

Qualitative interviews indicated a reluctance among some employers to share public spaces with MDWs who have a non-permanent visa status, despite many residing in the city for decades. Some employers made distinctions between what they considered full residents of Hong Kong, and MDWs, considered "temporary residents" and therefore not entitled to occupy public areas. The use of terminology such as "influx" to describe migrant gathering indicates a fear of migrant populations overwhelming public spaces, mirroring problematic language used to describe migrant populations globally. Although MDWs are not provided with specifically designated spaces to gather on days off, they are criticised for gathering in public spaces. Such fears may be underscored by other racialised notions that MDWs gathering poses a hygiene risk, and encourages workers to learn "bad habits" from one another.

> *"If I were a tourist visiting Hong Kong on Sunday, I would notice the large number of Filipino and Indian domestic workers occupying public spaces. While they may seem like locals, they are actually temporary residents who have only been in the city for a short time. Their presence can be disruptive to the local population, especially on weekends when they gather in parks and other recreational areas. It's important to consider how this influx of people can impact the daily lives of Hong Kong residents."* ***(interview #10)***

> *"They have some alliances where they share experiences during holidays or weekends. That's why I mentioned that they've learned bad habits from other domestic helpers when they have gatherings."* ***(interview #11)***

These attitudes mirror findings uncovered by Ladegaard (2011) that Chinese students in Hong Kong characterised Filipina domestic workers as "noisy," "unfriendly," and "cunning," with openly racist remarks being normalised. The criticism of MDWs gathering in public social spaces on Sundays further reflects what Siang (2021) observed in Singapore, where migrant workers are perceived as a "blight" on the city's social image. Further, the view that MDWs can be "disruptive to the local population" demonstrates how MDWs' visibility in public social spaces becomes a point of contention, despite their essential role in the domestic sphere.

4.2.4. Harmful Stereotypes & Perceptions of Inferiority

Statements were included within the survey to measure stereotypical perspectives that are commonly used to categorise certain diasporas of migrant workers. While a majority of employers disagreed, **16.3%** reported that MDWs are mostly uneducated. Exploitative employers were three times more likely **(26.7%)** than ethical employers **(8.6%)** to view MDWs as uneducated, indicating a relationship between this perception and exploitation **(Figure 11)**. IOM research from 2023 indicates that 25% of MDWs in Hong Kong have tertiary level education, with the same true for half of Filipino migrants. Survey data indicates that regardless, the labelling of migrant workers in society as uneducated may justify harsher employment practices by employers.

A small but notable proportion of employers **(14.1%)** agreed or strongly agreed that MDWs often lie and steal, with exploitative employers nearly twice as likely to hold this view (18.3%) as ethical

employers. A small proportion of employers **(11.4%)** reported the discriminatory perspective that MDWs carry unknown and rare diseases. Negative or discriminatory perspectives may have been related to exploitation, as employers who reported exploitation were 10% more likely to think that domestic workers carry unknown and rare diseases. These quantitative results provide statistical evidence for the prevalence of the negative stereotypes that Ho & Sewell (2023) identified through their discourse analysis, confirming the "position of inferiority" that MDWs occupy in Hong Kong society.

Figure 11: Employers Perceptions Disaggregated by Reported Exploitation

The data indicate that stereotypes about domestic workers in Hong Kong, painting them as dishonest, criminal and uneducated, persist, often influenced by media portrayals. In-depth interviews revealed how employers felt domestic helpers were likely to steal, seduce male employers, have poor hygiene, be dishonest and be poorly educated.

> *"When I was young, I read a book at the public library that taught Hong Kong employers how to guard against domestic workers. It mentioned that domestic workers might steal money or even seduce male employers."* ***(interview #3)***

This data reinforces Ho & Sewell's analysis of Chinese-language findings that MDWs are stereotyped as dishonest and sexually threatening. That said, the survey indicated that only a small minority of **5.2%** of employers actually thought MDWs were likely to seduce husbands or break up marriages. Regardless, these harmful stereotypes form the "labels" that society attaches to domestic workers, which may influence how they are treated.

4.2.5. Stereotyping of MDWs by Ethnic Origin

It was hypothesised that negative perceptions about the most common migrant sending countries may reflect negative migrant sentiment in general. To measure this, stereotypical statements

about sending countries were included within the survey. The data indicate that employers are more likely to perceive the Philippines as having issues with criminality **(15.7%)**, when compared with Indonesia **(8.8%)**, which may reflect comparatively negative attitudes towards Filipino MDWs and preferences for Indonesian MDWs. Employers reporting exploitation were twice as likely **(21.4%)** to think that the Philippines, where the majority of domestic workers in Hong Kong originate from, has a problem with criminality.

The data echoes the literature in indicating that some employers associated behavioural stereotypes with MDWs of different ethnicities. A minority of employers **(15.7%)** reported that Indonesians are better workers because they are more obedient, while nearly half of respondents were neutral on this point. A smaller **14.1%** reported that Filipinos tend to be more flirtatious or promiscuous, confirming Chang & Ling's (2010) finding that cultural portrayals of Filipinas in Hong Kong stereotype them as flirtatious and promiscuous. These views were a minority however, as half of respondents disagreed. Employers reporting exploitation were twice as likely when compared with ethical employers, to see Indonesians as more obedient **(21.4%)** and Filipinos as more flirtatious **(19.8%)**, highlighting the relationship between racialised stereotypes and exploitation.

Qualitative data supports the finding that perceptions of MDWs often depend on their nationality. For instance, employers reported that Indonesian MDWs were proficient in Cantonese, friendly, skilled at cooking, and attentive, though they have difficulty communicating in English. They were also characterised as comparatively more obedient and submissive. Conversely, MDWs from the Philippines were seen as clever and proficient in child care with good English language skills. Conversely, Filipino MDWs were also labelled as lazy, aggressive, forceful, unwilling to listen, and reckless. They were criticized for being cunning, "too assertive" and for wearing "revealing clothing". One participant noted they would prefer an Indonesian or Sri Lankan helper when considering their clothing choices "compared to Filipina helpers". Some employers also characterised MDWs of Nepalese and Indian origin as dishonest.

> *"I've heard quite a few negative things, including from friends who have hired them... They sometimes don't listen to instructions, and there's a tendency to slack off or be lazy."* ***(interview #7)***

> *"Where I come from, we believe two of the most notorious thieves or itchy fingers are helpers from Nepal and India."* ***(interview #12)***

These nationality-based stereotypes correspond with Palmer's (2019) observation that employers often rationalize MDWs' behaviours by attributing them to nationality and ethnicity rather than situational factors. Our qualitative data shows nationality-based attributions in perceptions of domestic workers linked to both stereotypes and experiences. This nationality-based preference aligns with Constable's (2017) finding that employers' perceptions of different ethnic backgrounds have evolved over time, with Indonesians increasingly viewed as more docile and obedient, while Filipina workers are seen as more "westernised" and difficult to manage.

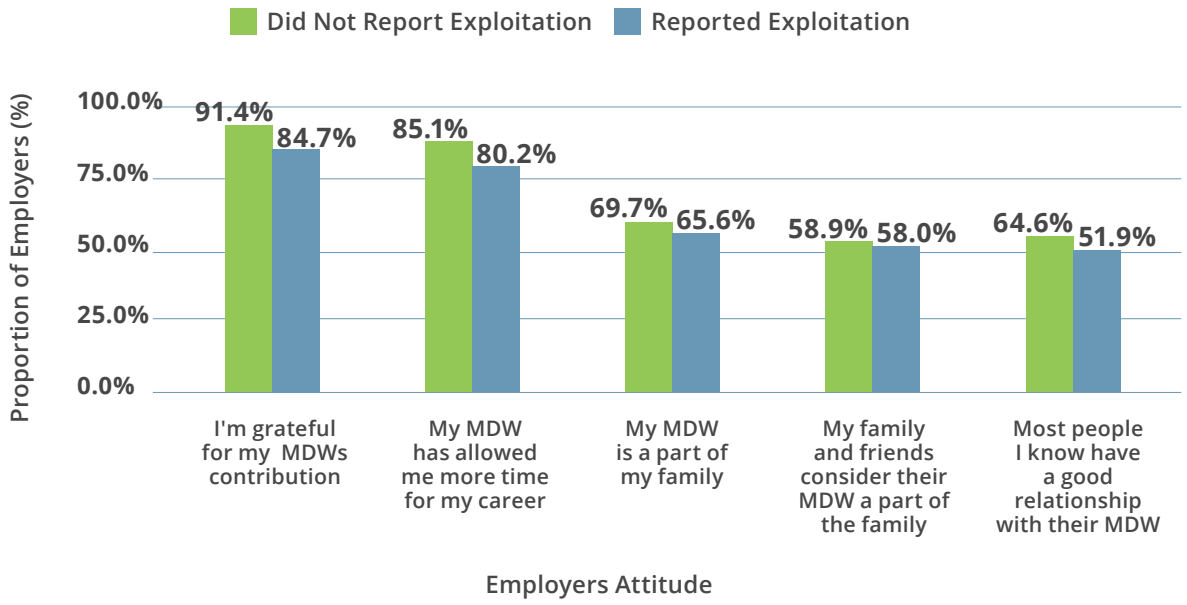
4.3. Employer Attitudes Towards Domestic Workers

The study was interested in employers' attitudes towards the MDWs within their own household, as it was hypothesised that these may differ from their broad perceptions about the MDW population in general.

4.3.1. Gratitude and Recognition of Household Contributions

The findings indicate that employers largely recognised the impact of MDWs on their lives, as **88.6%** reported being grateful for MDWs' contribution to their family. A large majority of employers in general also felt that their MDWs relieved them of their household burden **(87.3%)** and helped them contribute more time to their career **(83%)**. Employers generally positively evaluated their relationships with their domestic workers, overwhelmingly reporting that they had a good relationship **(79.7%)** and trusted the domestic worker in their household **(72.9%)**. As **Figure 12** indicates, there were no major differences in positive attitudes, relating to gratitude, contribution and inclusion in the family, between exploitative and ethical employers.

Figure 12: Employers Positive Attitude Disaggregated by Reported Exploitation



MDWs' contribution to the household was widely acknowledged as valuable during qualitative interviews. Employers emphasised how MDWs reduced work pressure, helped to manage household chores, and allowed more family members to pursue independent careers. For working parents, having someone to care for children was particularly important as it provided peace of mind and practical support.

"It fully makes us appreciate the kind of work our helper does day to day, because I think otherwise we wouldn't be able to have jobs and even any free time." ***(Interview #6)***

"Most of the MDW's tasks are about reducing our burdens, as housework can be quite time-consuming. With my MDW doing these tasks, I've been able to reduce my workload significantly." ***(Interview #15)***

4.3.2. Attitudes about Competence, Skills & Work Ethic

a). Questioning Competence and Intelligence

Regarding skills and work ethic, employers frequently evaluated MDWs based on their practical abilities and approach to work. Several employers expressed frustration with workers who lacked time management skills or could not perform multiple tasks simultaneously. This inability to multitask was portrayed as a significant shortcoming that affected household efficiency and added to employer stress.

> *"I saw her waiting for the food to steam; she waited until it was done before she started to fry. She can't multitask. Don't even talk about multitasking."* ***(Interview #2)***

Some employers went further, questioning the intellectual capabilities of their MDWs, suggesting that finding skilled workers was rare. One employer bluntly stated, *"Honestly, I think she's not very bright. I can only call her foolish"* **(Interview #11)**. These negative assessments of intelligence and capability reveal underlying attitudes about the competence level of domestic workers.

b). Appreciation of Hard Work & Competence

In contrast, other employers valued workers who demonstrated diligence, responsibility, and self-motivation, and reported being satisfied with workers' strong work ethic and skills. Employers particularly appreciated MDWs who were attentive to children and serious about their responsibilities. Some highlighted their MDWs' excellent time management, attentiveness, and household skills. Other positive appraisals were made about MDWs' efficiency, ability to learn quickly, and cooking skills. Employers reported being appreciative of their domestic workers' ability to adapt to family dynamics, which contributed significantly to the household.

> *"We previously hired someone eager to prove themselves. Once the baby started crying, they wouldn't stop until the issue was resolved. They suggested a method I wasn't familiar with. This tip was incredibly helpful and saved a lot of time. It's one example among many where their experience came in handy, and they generously shared it with me."* ***(interview #15)***

These perceptions and attitudes often varied based on nationality, with some employers suggesting that they see workers from specific countries, such as Indonesia, as possessing a better work ethic.

> *"This current Indonesian domestic worker is very responsible. I think she's great because I've hired two workers before, one from the Philippines and one is her; she is more self-motivated."* ***(Interview #2)***

4.3.3. Evaluation of Personal Character

Employers were divided on whether they preferred workers who showed independence and initiative or those who carefully followed instructions. This dichotomy reflects different management styles and expectations about the role of MDWs in the household. Some employers viewed MDWs as autonomous and self-managing, and others adopted a more hierarchical managerial approach, expecting obedience.

"I think she is more proactive compared to the last one... She takes initiative and doesn't wait to be told what to do. If she sees something that needs doing, she will take the initiative to do it, which is very good." ***(Interview #7)***

"But the MDW can't be too reckless. [I hope the MDW can] listen to employers' opinions and follow instructions carefully." ***(Interview #8)***

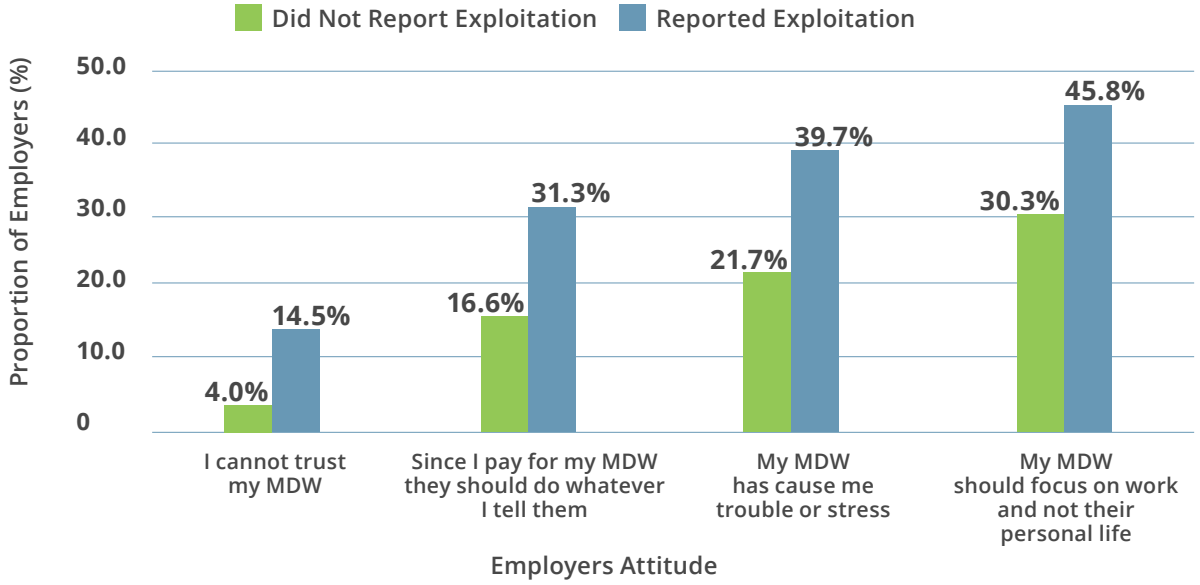
4.3.4. Controlling Attitudes and Disharmony

Though most employers positively evaluated their relationship with the domestic worker in their household, a significant proportion of employers demonstrated controlling attitudes and expressed disharmonious relationships. Employers who reported exploitation, however, were 10% more likely to report that they did not trust the domestic worker in their household, indicating a potential link between regarding workers with suspicion and treating them badly.

Over a third of employers (36.9%) reported that their domestic worker should focus solely on work and not their personal life. This sentiment was significantly more pronounced among employers who exploited their domestic workers, who were much more likely (45.8%) to agree. Employers who reported exploitation were also significantly more likely to expect obedience from their domestic helper, as 31.5% reported that "since I pay for my domestic worker, they should do whatever I tell them to do," as compared to 16.6% of ethical employers. The data indicate that employers who engage in exploitation may also have more controlling attitudes towards their MDWs. These data directly substantiate Siu's (2020) "subjugation model," which demonstrates how employers tend to assert dominance over MDWs. Our quantitative findings provide statistical support for the theories and models developed by existing literature, showing the prevalence of controlling attitudes among employers.

Around a third (29.4%) of employers were dissatisfied with their domestic worker, reporting that their MDW had caused them trouble or stress. This finding was significantly higher (39.7%) among employers who reported exploiting their domestic worker, highlighting tension as a factor in exploitative relationships.

Figure 13: Employers Negative Attitude Disaggregated by Reported Exploitation



4.3.5. Attitudes around Workers of Reproductive Age

Some employers during qualitative interviews explicitly expressed a preference for MDWs who were not of reproductive age, citing inconveniencies associated with MDWs' pregnancies. Some preferred older workers out of a desire to avoid pregnancy issues that might disrupt employment arrangements, while others sought mature workers for their patience and tolerance.

> *"I previously hired someone who was pregnant, and she became pregnant twice during her employment. I am now more cautious when hiring new employees. I tend to prefer candidates who are slightly older, especially after the experience with the previous employee who was in her thirties."* ***(Interview #1)***

> *"We realised that the younger you get, the more trouble you are inviting to yourself. So if they are over 40, they are more mature, they have more patience. They have more tolerance."* ***(Interview #12)***

The interview quotes reveal two motivations behind employers' age preferences: avoiding pregnancy-related disruptions and seeking personality traits perceived as age-dependent. This connects specifically to Tan's (2023) research, which found that employers implement control measures to prevent MDWs from becoming pregnant due to concerns about financial burdens and workforce disruption. While Tan documented these control practices, our qualitative data provides explicit employer reasoning, showing how pregnancy is viewed primarily as an inconvenience rather than as a reproductive rights issue.

4.3.6. Social Norms and Attitudes Towards MDWs

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour argues that social pressure, or how we perceive the attitudes of others towards a behaviour, influences our motivation to engage in that behaviour. The study sought to measure this social pressure by assessing employers' beliefs about the attitudes of their social groups towards MDWs. Employers who did not exploit their domestic workers were significantly more likely (64.6%) to perceive that most people they knew had a good relationship with their domestic worker, indicating that perception of positive societal relations with domestic workers may be related to behaving more ethically, in line with Ajzen's theory.

The quantitative findings, however, do reveal an interesting disconnect between personal attitudes and perceived social norms. Though employers largely positively evaluated their relationship with their MDW (79.7%), they tended to be more critical when describing the attitudes of the wider society (59.2%). Nearly half (48.4%) of employers reported that most families in Hong Kong do not think domestic helpers should have equal rights. Employers were also 10% more likely to report that they considered their domestic worker to be family (68%) than they were to report that their social groups considered MDWs to be family. This discrepancy illustrates what Tunon & Baruah (2012) identified as the gap between individual employer attitudes and broader societal perceptions about migrant workers. The findings indicate that employers may perceive society to possess less favourable attitudes towards MDWs, which could be an enabling environment for unethical employment practices.

4.3.7. Economic Constraints & Attitudes Towards MDWs

Financial concerns also emerged as an important factor influencing employer attitudes. Survey data and qualitative interviews indicate that some viewed hiring MDWs as an economic burden that strained family resources, while others worried about "wasting money" on workers who did not meet expectations. Low and low-middle-income households may have expected more from their MDWs and faced disappointment, as they were three times more likely to expect them to "do whatever I tell them", and also 15% more likely to report that their MDW caused them trouble or stress. There were also concerns about MDWs taking advantage of generous employers, revealing underlying anxieties about financial resources.

> *"As for my dad, he might see hiring a helper as an economic burden."* ***(Interview #3)***

> *"We wondered if we would have to change helpers like others, wasting money."* ***(Interview #14)***

> *"Which means what she would think is: she can take advantage of me. Just because I'm kind, she can take advantage of me."* ***(Interview #9)***

These concerns focus specifically on the financial investment in hiring MDWs and potential losses if workers do not meet expectations. The findings correspond with IOM's 2020 data, citing employers' economic concerns and constraints, including: reluctance to pay higher wages beyond the Minimum Allowable Wage; concerns about additional costs beyond salaries; reluctance to provide better working conditions if it involved additional financial outlay; and financial concerns about replacing workers who did not meet expectations. Several of our interviewees' worries about "wasting money" directly mirror IOM's findings about replacement costs and financial losses associated with worker turnover.

However, our qualitative data also adds nuance to IOM's findings by revealing the emotive language employers use, such as anxieties about MDWs "taking advantage" of generous employers (Interview #9), suggesting that financial concerns intertwine with broader power dynamics and trust issues not fully captured in IOM's more quantitative assessment.

4.3.8. Gender & Attitudes Towards MDWs

While both genders showed appreciation for their domestic workers, females demonstrated stronger sentiments, as they were 24.7% more likely to strongly agree that they were grateful for their domestic worker, and more likely to consider their domestic worker a part of their family. While rates of recognition of MDWs were similar, women were significantly (19%) more likely than men to feel that MDWs helped them with their household burden, and felt more strongly that they had a positive relationship with their worker. Conversely, women report slightly higher levels of frustration related to their MDWs, reporting higher rates of their MDW causing them trouble or stress, perhaps due to closer emotional ties and managerial responsibilities.

[5] Labour Department. 2025. Foreign Domestic Helpers. Available at https://www.fdh.labour.gov.hk/en/news.html

4.4. Employment Practices

I. Employment Conditions

4.4.1. Employee Salaries

The study showed that around a quarter **(25.8%)** of employers are paying their domestic helper a minimum wage, or between HK$4,870-4,990 per month. The current Minimum Allowable Wage (MAW) for domestic workers in Hong Kong is $4,990 per month as of 28 September 2024.[5] For contracts that began before then, however, workers may still earn the prior MAW of HK$4,870. A concerning study finding indicated that **4.9%** of employers were actually paying below HK$4,870 and therefore were underpaying domestic workers in violation of Hong Kong law. This data directly corresponds with Liang's (2016) finding that MDWs are "explicitly excluded from statutory minimum wage provisions" and receive less than half the statutory minimum wage for other workers in Hong Kong.

A majority **(38.6%)** of domestic workers earned HK$5,000-6,500 per month, while a quarter of higher earners made HK$6,600-10,500. At the highest end, few domestic workers **(2.9%)** earned up to HK$14,500 per month. There were no major differences in salaries for domestic workers between employers who reported exploitation and those who did not.

Table 2: Salary breakdown for MDWs as reported by employers

Wage Bracket	Percent (%)
Less than 4,870	4.9
4,870-4,990	25.8
5000-6,500	38.6
6,600-10,500	24.2
10,600-14,500+	2.9

Our wage distribution findings also align with IOM's (2023) documentation of unfair wage deductions, as our qualitative data notes that employers may implement "deducting the meal and travel allowance" as punishment (Interview #5), reflecting the 7.3% of migrant workers who reported employers making unfair deductions as penalties according to IOM's research.

4.4.2. Workplace Benefits

Some workplace benefits for domestic workers were widely reported, particularly giving gifts or bonuses to MDWs when they have done a good job, which was common **(79.1%)**. Half of employers reported giving salary advances or even loans to their domestic workers, while even more employers **(57.5%)** reported allowing their domestic workers to undertake skills development or educational training courses.

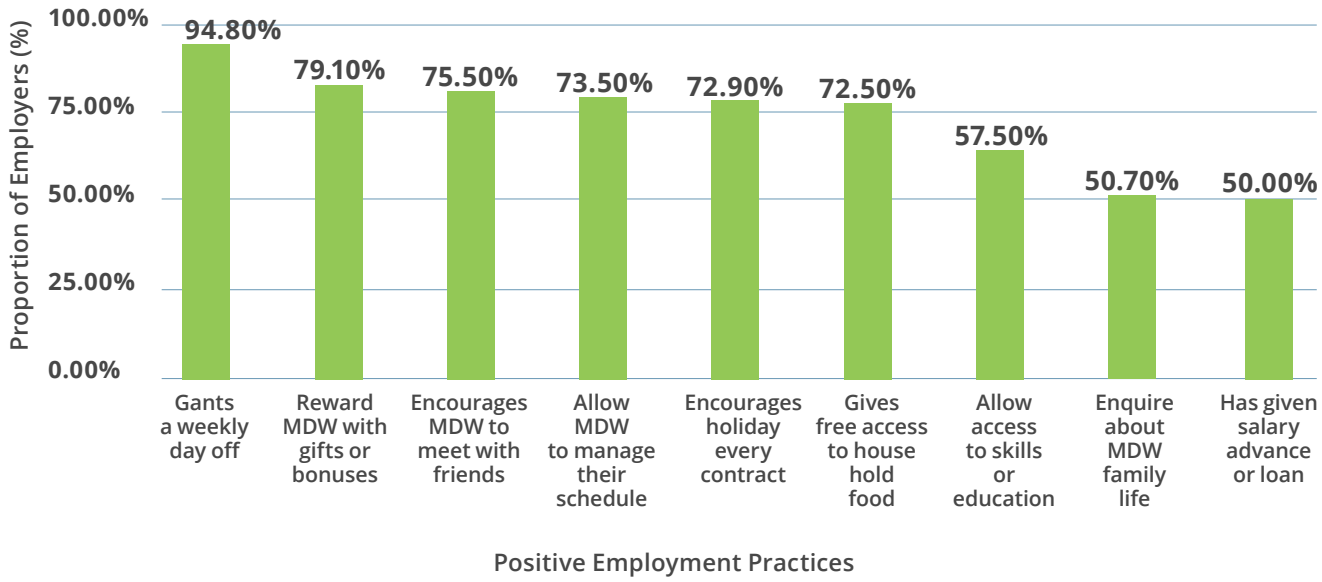
Qualitative interviews also supported these findings, as many employers mentioned providing workers with benefits such as gifts, bonuses or rewards for holidays or special occasions in exchange for good work. One employer noted giving extra food at dinner as a reward instead of monetary incentives, highlighting the reliance of domestic workers on their employers for meeting basic needs.

> *"Every year, for Christmas, Chinese New Year, New Year's, we give them money as a token of appreciation."* ***(interview #12)***

> *"We're going to celebrate her birthday as a family. We'll get a cake and sing together so she feels a part of the family."* ***(interview #6)***

> *"I don't usually give out special cash incentives, but I might do it in a different way, like by giving extra portions of food at dinner."* ***(interview #10)***

Figure 14: Positive Employment Pratices Reported by Employers



4.4.3. Living Conditions, Privacy & Surveillance

A majority of employers reported that their domestic worker had their own room **(69.9%)**. A smaller proportion shared with another member of the household, either children or the elderly **(17.3%)**, or slept in communal spaces within the house, such as the kitchen or living room **(4.6%)**. In both cases, MDWs in these circumstances may lack proper access to privacy. This supports Justice Centre Hong Kong's (2016) finding that live-in requirements expose workers to inappropriate accommodation and privacy violations. A small number of employers reported that MDWs lived outside of their house **(5.9%)**.

Employers demonstrated practices that sought to control or restrict workers, in doing so, limiting their personal freedoms at work. Domestic workers' privacy may be infringed by constant surveillance at home, as **39.9%** of employers reported having security cameras in their homes.

Employers who reported exploitation were significantly more likely to surveil their domestic workers, as reported by more than half **(52.7%)**.

Qualitative data support this finding, as a number of employers shared how they installed surveillance cameras within their homes to monitor the activities of their domestic workers. Employers noted how the presence of surveillance directly impacted the behaviour of their domestic worker, who became "more cautious" after being observed. This surveillance practice aligns with Amrith's (2015) concerns about excessive monitoring in MDWs' isolated home-based working environments.

> *"We installed cameras. After installation, I noticed she became more cautious and diligent. Having cameras is also beneficial for ensuring safety, especially when my dad and the worker are home alone."* ***(interview #2)***

> *"This is the usual way, not only my practice, but also the practices of most Hong Kong people. All my friends install CCTV to help monitor the situation of the home."* ***(interview #5)***

The acknowledgement that the use of surveillance is relatively common in Hong Kong, as supported by the quantitative data, supports Azjen's Theory that "subjective norms" or the perception of the behaviour of the wider society, may be used to justify, or reinforce the acceptability of certain behaviours. Surveilling domestic workers via CCTV is considered to be an acceptable and appropriate behaviour as it is perceived to be common amongst peers and also within society at large.

4.4.4. Religious and Cultural Accommodation

Some domestic workers are not free to practice their religion at their place of work, as reported by **15.4%** of employers, limiting their freedom to engage in their religion at all as a result of the legally mandated live-in rule. This corresponds with Ha & Jang's (2015) concept of cultural threat, where migrants' diverse cultural backgrounds are perceived as dangerous elements that can potentially undermine local cultural and religious identity.

However, our qualitative data also reveals examples of cultural accommodation. One employer noted: "If there's pork in one of the meals, my mom would prepare an additional dish for her" (Interview #8), while another mentioned respecting a worker's religious attire: "So, I didn't interfere; I saw her covering her head and wearing long clothes, even in the summer months... she's an adult, and I'm not Muslim" (Interview #11). These examples add nuance to Niyomsilpa & Sunpuwan's (2014) finding about host society members experiencing a sense of "otherness" toward migrant communities, showing how some employers attempt to bridge cultural differences rather than simply discriminating against MDWs' cultural and religious practices.

II. Managerial Approach & Relationship Dynamics

4.4.5. Flexible Managerial Approach

A majority of employers reported compliance with most legal obligations, such as allowing

domestic workers a day off weekly. Some employers took a flexible approach to employment, with **73.5%** reporting that their MDW manages their own working schedule. Three-quarters of employers **(75.5%)** also encouraged domestic workers to meet with friends on their day off. Half of employers demonstrated a friendly relationship with their domestic worker, often enquiring about their domestic worker's family life.

Qualitative data support this finding as employers reported giving MDWs the freedom to choose how to perform their tasks effectively, including managing household chores or deciding what to cook. Some employers appreciate it when MDWs take initiative and offer ideas for organising their tasks. This leniency is often rooted in trust in MDWs' character and work ethic.

"The way we work is that certain things are set, but also we want her to use her own initiative and come up with ideas, and so we give her freedom in her work, while also making sure that she meets her responsibilities." ***(interview #6)***

"It's rare to find such a dedicated domestic worker who cares for two elderly people, so I feel I can be lenient with her." ***(interview #2)***

"She has a lot of freedom in choosing what to cook, as we usually don't mind what dishes she makes—sometimes she decides on her own." ***(employer #3)***

4.4.6. Open Communication, Respect & Mutual Understanding

Employers valued clear communication and mutual understanding, and in many cases were satisfied with their domestic workers' ability to communicate. Employers were pleased, particularly when MDWs understood the language spoken at home, even if it was not their native language. MDWs were also praised for following instructions, accepting feedback and demonstrating patience.

"Even if something has already been done, my mom might have a suggestion for improvement, and the helper is patient and does everything without complaining." ***(interview #8)***

"I was mostly worried about communication issues. Fortunately, this helper's English isn't too bad." ***(interview #1)***

"I think she is very good because she always communicates with us if she doesn't understand something." ***(interview #2)***

The qualitative data also demonstrates how some employers considered the well-being and needs of their domestic workers, and were lenient in their managerial approach to accommodate that. Employers showed understanding by allowing domestic workers to use their phones while at work, meet with friends, and take breaks as needed, lightening their workload where necessary. They also showed respect for MDWs' cultural backgrounds and allowed them to freely observe their own cultural practices or habits, such as wearing the hijab or avoiding pork.

"I think it's okay for her to use her phone sometimes. I know she FaceTimes her family while looking after the kids, and I don't see it as a big issue, as long as it's not excessive. " ***(interview #1)***

"My mother noticed how sad she looked around five or six o'clock while preparing dinner, so we suggested she take a break, and we ended up ordering takeout." ***(interview #3)***

Some employers strive for mutual understanding with their MDWs, achieved through open and clear communication, respect, and a genuine effort to understand their MDWs' situations. One employer even attempted to lighten their MDW's workload, recognising the significant responsibilities they bear.

"I never treated her like a servant but as a partner because I thought she could help us." ***(interview #11)***

"People say you need to make your requirements clear from the beginning, because she doesn't know what we want. So we communicated what we wanted and made it clear from the beginning." ***(interview #14)***

"So basically, as an expat, I feel bad every day that I have a helper, and I try to make sure she has as little work to do as possible. Whereas for local Hong Kong people, I'll see them walking down the street, and the helper is pushing the baby carriage, and the mom is just talking on her phone. For us, I will always carry the child, and you can help me with other things. If we ever need to carry something, then we make sure that each of us is carrying something. Let's share the load. Otherwise, I would feel bad." ***(interview #4)***

4.4.7. Familial Relationships

A majority of employers considered their domestic worker to be a part of their family **(68%)**. This trend was consistent, even when comparing employers who exploited their domestic workers and those who did not. Some employers developed close, comfortable relationships with their workers, expressing genuine interest in their lives and cultures. Such employers viewed their MDWs almost as extended family members and valued the interpersonal connection. This qualitative finding supports Ozeki's (1997) argument that employer-MDW relationships tend to evolve into quasi-familial bonds over time.

"I am quite close to her. I tend to feel relaxed. I enjoy learning about her culture, and we share things." ***(Interview #3)***

Eight out of the fifteen employers interviewed stated that they treat or consider their MDW as family, while nine reported that they regularly engage in discussions with them. Employers reported that they valued the MDWs' ability to adapt to family dynamics, the friendly relationships formed, and the overall contributions they made to the family. They enjoy joking around, inquiring about MDWs' personal lives and family backgrounds, and occasionally include them in family gatherings and trips. They are also comfortable eating together, taking MDWs out to eat, and even cooking for their domestic worker.

"When we started looking for a helper, we always wanted them to be part of our family. ***(interview #6)***

"Sometimes after dinner, when she's finished her work, we might sit together and chat. Sometimes she brings up topics, and sometimes I do." ***(interview #1)***

4.4.8. Hierarchical Relationships & Moral Qualms

Others maintained more distant, hierarchical relationships, with some describing the need to assert authority over workers who did not "know their place." This attitude reflects power dynamics inherent in the employer-MDW relationship, where employers feel entitled to control worker behaviour.

"Sometimes the employees have to step in and be a little bit bossy, and say, Hey, do this and do that because you don't know your place." ***(Interview #9)***

This finding exemplifies Siu's (2020) "subjugation model", where employers assert dominance over MDWs. Further, these hierarchical relationships directly demonstrate what Ziliotti (2022) identifies as status hierarchies where "certain behaviours, social practices, or policies reflect a specific type of unequal relationship between individuals or groups." The employers' comments about workers needing to "know their place" exemplify Confucian hierarchical values operating in employment relationships.

Some employers expressed discomfort with the hierarchical nature of the employment relationship. One expatriate employer articulated moral qualms about the entire arrangement:

"I think the concept of having a servant is inherently immoral. I actually had a big argument with my wife when she was pregnant and I was trying to convince her not to get a domestic helper because you just should not outsource the raising of your children to anybody else." ***(Interview #4)***

This suggests significant cultural differences in attitudes toward domestic work arrangements. The suggested "immorality" inherent in the relationship demonstrates discomfort with the servant-master dynamic in traditional Chinese families (as noted by Ho & Sewell (2023)), suggesting resistance to rather than perpetuation of historical patterns.

The expatriate employer's perspective also reveals a more complex moral landscape where some employers are conscious of and uncomfortable with existing power dynamics in employer-MDW relationships, thus challenging what Nickerson (2024) defined as the Marxist view on the family, which always perceives employers as exploiters of working-class domestic labour.

4.4.9. Strict Management & Punishment

In contrast to the employment relationships that are more close and familial, some employers reported explicitly that they do not consider their domestic worker to be a part of their family. These employers reported more strictly employment-based relationships and distance from their domestic workers, including eating meals separately.

"It is important to be mindful of the employer-employee relationship, which is not necessarily the same as family. I believe it's too early to consider her as a family member unless you've observed her dedication over time." ***(interview #15)***.

While many employers in Hong Kong adopt a more lenient managerial approach and give their MDWs freedoms, others adopt a strict management style. Scolding, interrogating, reprimanding and punishing workers were reported practices. Some employers felt that it was necessary to uphold hierarchy, ensure tasks are properly completed or encourage workers to learn.

"After all, we have an employer-employee relationship, so I tend to be a bit stricter, which is necessary. Generally, it's better to be stricter because I worry about accidents or her overspending, so I'm usually on the strict side." ***(interview #13)***

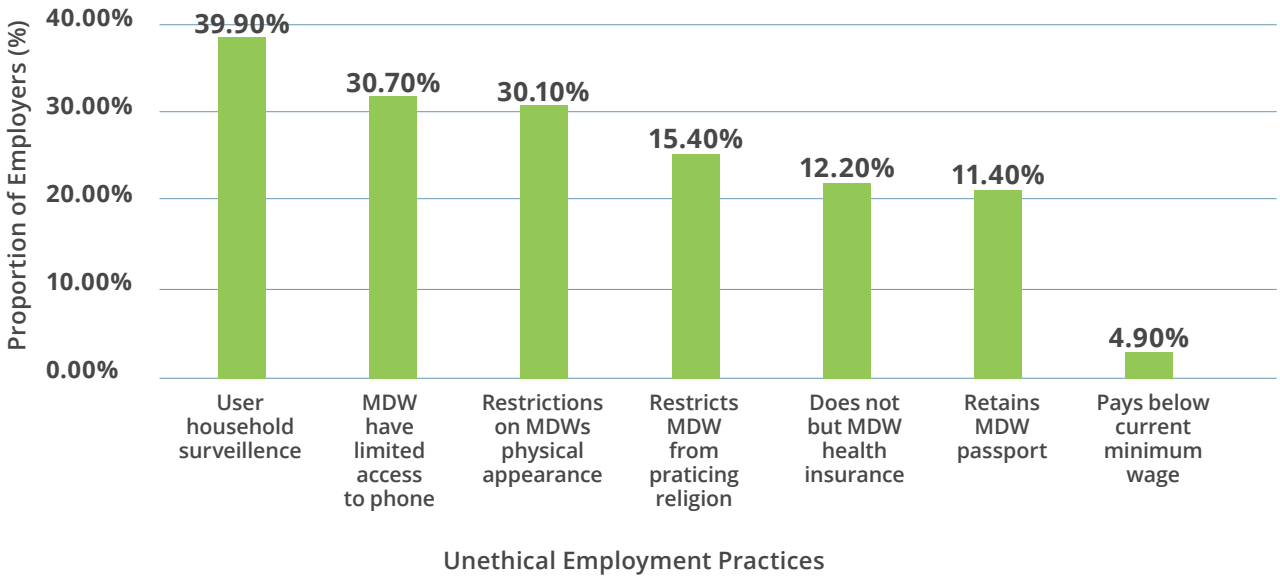
"Sometimes when he makes a mistake, I will use some harsh language to reprimand him because he sometimes learns things slowly or has difficulty communicating." ***(interview #10)***

Employers explicitly reported punishing MDWs for mistakes, including scolding their domestic workers or enacting punishments if they did not meet expectations. Survey data indicate that scolding was the most common practice, as reported by 44.1% of respondents, while salary deductions and overtime work were reported by 18% of respondents. Qualitative interviews also triangulated this data, reinforcing that punishments might include verbal threats or salary deductions.

"We will punish her by deducting the meal and travel allowance because these are very flexible. The basic [salary] actually can't be moved because we have signed a contract." ***(interview #5)***

"I think the situation kind of improved after those threatening words. We didn't actually impose penalties, but I think sometimes the threatening words are the only means to remedy the situation." ***(interview #5)***

Figure 15: Negative Employment Pratices Reported by Employers



III. Controlling Practices, Restrictions and Rights Violations

Indicators of illegal employment practice or unethical behaviour also arose based on survey findings. Around 12.1% of employers indicated that they did not provide their domestic worker with health insurance, while 11.4% reported holding onto their domestic helper's passport, both of which are illegal according to Hong Kong employment law. Further, 13.1% of employers did not allow their domestic worker to freely eat food within the household. This corresponds with Amrith's (2015) identification of key vulnerabilities faced by MDWs in Hong Kong, including restrictions on freedom of movement and document withholding. Our data provides concrete statistical evidence for these vulnerabilities and concerns, showing how prevalent these illegal practices remain despite their prohibition under Hong Kong law.

Nearly a third (30.7%) of employers restricted their domestic workers' access to a mobile phone while at work, limiting avenues for external communication. This supports Constable's (2017) finding that employers often impose strict rules and schedules on MDWs. In addition, a significant proportion of employers sought to control the appearance of their MDWs, as 30.1% reported that they ensured their domestic worker refrained from wearing make-up and revealing clothing at work.

The qualitative interviews further revealed that some employers impose restrictions on worker rights and entitlements, such as by requiring them to sleep in storage rooms, denying days off, limiting internet access, and restricting access to food and household utilities. Some employers fail to respect the cultural or religious practices of their MDWs, instead imposing their own culture and habits upon workers.

> *"I talked to some domestic workers who worked for Chinese families that were very strict and cheap. They would take maximum advantage of the employee. They wouldn't let them use the washing machine and forced them to wash their clothes by hand. Then they wouldn't give them a food allowance, but all the food they cook contains pork, which she can't eat, so she just has to eat whatever she can find."* ***(interview #4)***

Qualitative interviews also revealed additional unethical practices amongst employers; however, employers mostly relayed instances of other employers exploiting workers, rather than sharing their own personal experiences. Some of the examples given by interviewees included excessive overtime, harsh criticism and confiscation of personal documents.

> *"Some employers think they should make the most of the workers' efforts and tend to be very critical."* ***(interview #3)***

> *"I've heard about some people being harsh to their helpers, like when employers go on vacation and only leave a few instant noodles for five days."* ***(interview #11)***.

> *"[Other employers] even mentioned things like confiscating their passports and such, but we wouldn't do something like that."* ***(interview #14)***

IV. Impact of Gender, Income & Nationality on Employment Practices

Regression analysis was conducted to uncover any relationships between demographic variables and the various attitudes, perceptions and behavioural scales included in the study. The analysis indicated a correlation, and therefore a strong relationship, between employment practices and the gender and monthly household income of employers.

Gender

Employment practices reveal notable gender differences. Women were 15.7% more likely to strongly disagree that they kept their MDWs' passports for safety reasons, indicating differing perspectives on document retention. Men were twice as likely as women (21.1%) to restrict their MDWs' access to food within the household. Additionally, women were more inclined to encourage their MDWs to take holidays each contract period and meet friends on their days off, with a 20% higher likelihood compared to men, who reported more indifference. Women also felt more strongly—by 20%—about rewarding their MDWs with gifts or bonuses for good work. Women also tended to foster closer relationships, being nearly a third (28.9%) more likely than men to inquire regularly about their MDWs' personal lives. That said, women were more likely to impose restrictions on personal appearances for MDWs, such as clothing and makeup choices, and may be more aware of and vulnerable to conflict-related stressors.

Monthly Household Income

Employment practices across income groups in Hong Kong reveal distinct patterns. Middle-income households exhibited the highest rates of exploitative practices, including being most likely to retain MDWs' passports—particularly compared to high-income households—and to restrict MDWs' access to food (23%). They were also less likely to encourage their MDWs to take holidays each contract period (12.5%) and to inquire about their personal lives, possibly due to resource constraints. Low and low-middle-income households were twice as likely to avoid purchasing health insurance for their MDWs and to restrict mobile phone access, reflecting economic limitations. Additionally, lower-income households were more prone to restrict religious practices and to control MDWs' appearance more stringently, while being more likely to implement surveillance within their homes to secure belongings—more than twice as likely as higher-income households. In contrast, high-income households were 20% more likely to grant loans to their MDWs and were more generous with bonuses, with upper-middle-income households being significantly more likely to give bonuses, although 10% of the highest-income households reported not giving any. These variations highlight how economic resources influence employment practices towards MDWs across different income groups.

Nationality of Employer

Qualitative interviews also revealed that employers associated certain managerial styles with employees of different ethnic backgrounds or nationalities. Some participants reported that Western employers were more flexible and respectful in their managerial approach when compared with employers of ethnically Chinese origin.

> *"So there seems to be a clear divide along racial lines. Most of my white, specifically Western, friends go the extra mile to treat their helpers as family. I know one family who are away 6 months of the year and they tell their helper to invite anyone, buy all the food and put it on the bill. Another friend has an*

Indonesian helper who is 80, she still lives with them because they want to be together and they treat her with the utmost respect." ***(interview #4)***.

Some employers shared that employers of Chinese origin are perceived as stricter and often unsatisfied with their helpers' performance. They are also seen as more likely to mistreat workers and disregard labour laws. This directly supports Cheung & Mok's (1998) finding that Filipina MDWs expressed higher satisfaction with Western employers who offered more comfortable work environments, treated them as equals, and respected their personal space.

> *"In general, I hear Chinese families complain more often that they have to constantly change helpers, whereas the white families are just like, yeah, we've had the same helper for 30 years. We don't want to change her. You know, usually the families that have to go through a lot of helpers in a few years. Well, I wouldn't want to live with you either."* ***(interview #4)***.

4.5. Managing Conflict & Violence

4.5.1 Employer Responses to Conflict Scenarios

Several hypothetical scenarios were included within the survey, with respondents required to indicate their likelihood of responding in different ways on a scale of 1-5. The scenarios were intended to measure how employers would manage conflict within their employment relationship.

The first question imagines a scenario in which a domestic helper has defaulted on a loan, resulting in a money lender contacting the employer. The most commonly reported course of action in this scenario was to work out a repayment plan (41%), not to get involved (39.8%) or terminate the domestic worker's contract (30%). Employers who reported exploitation were much more likely to respond to this scenario with verbal abuse[6] (27.5%) compared to 6.2%. They were also nearly 4 times as likely to confiscate their domestic workers' passports so they could not take more loans, as reported by 19.7% of respondents who reported exploitation. These findings align with Constable's (2017) research, which notes that some Hong Kong employers view MDWs as purchased property and discipline and even abuse them similarly to traditional Chinese bondservants, imposing strict rules and regulations.

The second scenario imagines a situation in which a domestic helper is out remitting money to their family back home, resulting in them neglecting to finish their work tasks for the day. The most commonly reported response among participants in this scenario was to have a discussion with their domestic worker (68.8%) or try to understand what was going on at home (65%). Roughly 10% of employers would require their domestic worker to make up the time during their day off, while employers who reported exploitation were much more likely to resort to threats or physical punishments. A significant proportion of those who reported exploitation would maybe or definitely threaten their worker with a punishment (14.9%) or use corporal punishment to teach them a lesson (11%).

[6] "I shout at my helper to teach them a lesson."

The third scenario imagines a situation in which a domestic helper breaks a valuable item in the home, one of multiple incidents of broken items that month. A majority of respondents reported they would have a discussion (72.3%), explain what their domestic worker did wrong (63.2%) or try to see things from their domestic worker's point of view (48.1%) in this scenario. A smaller but significant proportion, however, would consider deducting the cost of the item from their salary (27.9%) or resort to verbal abuse to discipline their domestic worker (18.7%). Employers who reported exploitation were twice as likely to deduct salaries, five times more likely to use verbal abuse, and four times more likely to use corporal punishment (8.9%) when compared with other employers.

Figure 16: Positive Conflict Management Strategies Reported by Employers

4.5.2 Factors & Drivers of Household Conflict

Employers attributed a range of causal factors to explaining conflict scenarios with migrant workers. These included a perceived lack of relevant skills required for the job, poor work ethic, undesirable personality characteristics and inability to follow instructions, among other factors.

a) Skills and Communication Issues

In assessing MDWs' relevant skills, some employers reported that MDWs' irresponsibility and ignorance caused problems within the household. They complained about employees having a lack of knowledge, a lack of proper training in housework, and mismatched language skills or communication issues.

> *"If I ask her to go to the grocery store and buy something, she often forgets half of the items or assumes she doesn't need to buy them. In situations where something is missing, I would expect her to be more proactive. She should keep me updated on what to purchase and what to skip, since she only goes shopping once a week."* ***(interview #9)***

> *"She needs guidance in cooking since her methods are different from ours. Laundry and cleaning also require some teaching."* ***(interview #10)***

"She claims to have worked in Hong Kong for several years, but after eight years, she doesn't even know the Cantonese words for sugar and salt." ***(interview #11)***

"Initially, I was concerned about communication issues because you communicate with them in English, and even when using English, she might not fully understand. Sometimes, when you type out an entire sentence, she might not grasp the meaning of your entire sentence. There could be misunderstandings, and this is a common issue." ***(interview #1)***

Communication challenges are a widely cited source of tension and challenge for employers in managing MDWs. Employers report that MDWs often misinterpret instructions, and in some cases fail to communicate openly on important issues.

"Back in 2019, the doctor said my mom could reduce her medication for diabetes. The MDW did reduce it, but later, the blood test results weren't ideal. If there's a problem, the MDW should let me know, and if necessary, we could go to the doctor again, but she just took it upon herself to increase the medication" ***(interview #11)***

"Something that really annoys my wife is when our helper misinterprets instructions, and in my wife's opinion, our helper is not using her common sense." ***(interview #2)***

The above accounts reflect Justice Centre Hong Kong's (2016) findings that language barriers significantly complicate employer-MDW relationships and can lead to misunderstandings that escalate into conflict. Anderson (2007) further argues that these communication challenges are often weaponised by employers to maintain power imbalances, with "not understanding instructions" becoming grounds for disciplinary action rather than prompting improved communication approaches.

b) Work Ethics and Behaviour

The qualitative data indicate that tension arose from employers' dissatisfaction with MDWs' work ethic and performance. Employers reported MDWs being idle at home and being irresponsible.

"Although I have written a set of instructions and I've given her, it becomes a headache or a menace, because she's not able to remember much: even the basic things like things which have been done over and over again. Now she's been with me for 2 years, but in most cases, I have to repeat the same instruction over and over." ***(interview #9)***

"A lot of the dishes that she would make were not really to my taste or my wife's taste." ***(interview #2)***

Some employers mentioned that during their employment, MDWs demonstrated poor work ethics that were characterised by being slow to complete tasks and not having good initiative.

"My mom sometimes complained that she worked slowly, maybe because she would be on her phone while mopping the floor." ***(interview #3)***

"It takes quite a long time for her to buy the groceries or the takeaway. I'm not sure if she's hanging around or chatting with her friends." ***(interview #5)***

"There are times when I wake up, and she hasn't even gotten up yet. While I'm at work, she's still in bed. I prepare breakfast for myself." ***(interview #11)***

"Sometimes, they only work when directly asked; if some clothes are not washed or hung up, they won't do it unless told." ***(interview #7)***

Employers also expressed grievances relating to the perceived ineffectiveness of MDWs in undertaking household work. Specific challenges cited included workers being constantly on their phones, lacking in common sense, being careless and forgetful.

"She would play on her phone even when my son called her, and she tied the children to their chairs for long periods, preventing them from moving around." ***(interview #1)***

"Sometimes she forgets to buy things or cooks but forgets to turn on the rice cooker. The dishes could be ready, but the rice isn't cooked, situations like that." ***(interview #7)***

"I constantly find hairs in the food, which feels very careless. Every time, I have to ask her why there are so many hairs in the food, and every day, I end up removing them myself." ***(interview #9)***

c). Following Instructions and Expectations

A theme that arose among numerous in-depth interviews with employers was conflict arising from MDWs failing to meet the expectations of their employers. Specific examples related to MDWs that employers felt were not making any progress at work, did not follow instructions or guidance, and had poor adaptability and flexibility.

"Although I have written a set of instructions and I've given her, it becomes a headache or a menace, because she's not able to remember much: even the basic things like things which have been done over and over again. Now she's been with me for 2 years, but in most cases, I will have to end up repeating the same instruction over and over." ***(interview #9)***

"Her attitude deteriorated to the point where she wouldn't listen to me." ***(interview #11)***

d). Serious Incidents and Trust Issues

Negative experiences reported by employers also included incidents or perceived crises for which employers attributed blame to MDWs. This included MDWs damaging or breaking employer property, becoming pregnant, being in debt or having loans, misusing employers' personal information, using household items improperly, and lying or stealing their employer's belongings.

"She borrowed money. The trouble was that those loan sharks were contacting me. They couldn't find her, and while she could return to the Philippines, they came to me instead. I didn't give her permission to use my name or my home phone number to give to these companies. Some of these illegal financial companies even asked her to take videos of my home to use as evidence to pressure me. That behaviour was extremely outrageous. I feel like it's not just a simple annoyance—it really lowered my trust in hiring domestic helpers. It's rare in Hong Kong to see people misuse others' personal information like this." ***(interview #15)***

"Every week there used to be an incident, breaking off a plate, breaking off a.. I believe in a minimalistic living. So I have very limited glassware and ceramicware in my house. Now she keeps breaking every week, and I need to have it as a set, because any guests come for dinner or lunch, I need to provide them with a set, and if one thing is gone, then I have to purchase the whole stuff" ***(interview #9)***

Employers also reported incidents with money lenders or loan sharks, and crisis situations such as MDWs running away from their employers' house.

"My cousin had a common issue: the helper borrowing money, with people coming to collect debts and send letters. The helper ran away while they were on vacation." ***(interview #14)***

e) Hygiene and Sharing of Personal Space

Additionally, there were concerns about hygiene in employers' homes. Employers often felt that they and their MDWs had different hygiene standards. Employers reported that the unhygienic practices of MDWs and their personal habits, such as being unorganised, caused inconvenience. Such concerns relate to the intimate sharing of personal space between employers and their MDWs and the associated tensions that arise in the domestic environment as a result.

"She didn't shower every day, opting to bathe every two to three days. Therefore, I had concerns about her hygiene." ***(interview #10)***

"She brought a lot of her own things, which cluttered the entire house." ***(interview #2)***

"She needs to share the bathroom or toilets with us; this sharing of the personal space can be challenging for my family" ***(interview #5)***

f) Cultural Conflicts & Personality Clashes

The qualitative data reveal that clashing personalities and cultural perspectives may be a source of tension between employers and employees within the household context. Employers reported feeling aggrieved by encounters where they felt disrespected, felt their MDW's behaviour was inappropriate or took a dislike to the personality, attitude or behaviour of their MDW. Challenges around employers feeling manipulated point to a delicate balance of power within employer-MDW relationships.

"She can throw anything at me. So when respect has been so mutually given, then you don't have the right to talk to me like that, because I'm your employer. I feel collaboration and communication could be better than just walking away, slamming the door, and that kind of attitude." ***(interview #9)***

"They provoked it to make it escalate to a situation which is not required. They didn't respond with a very good attitude. And then they put the same kind of energy when they were cooking in the kitchen, and we were eating that energy food with that attitude." ***(interview #12)***

"Every day was like a living hell for me because this domestic helper preyed on me and she made me cook for her. Then one day I asked her, 'Am I working for you or you're working for me?'." ***(interview #9)***

"It was getting increasingly inappropriate, as if she were my boss" ***(interview #11)***

MDWs and employers also often had disagreements due to different preferences and lifestyles. Often this has resulted from cultural differences.

"I think she does take things very personally. We want her to raise stuff, which I think is also something that's not culturally very um, something that she used to. So things make it more difficult." ***(interview #6)***

g). Financial Issues

Perceived financial irresponsibility or disagreements around money were a cause of conflict within the household. Some employers reported being aggrieved at having to advance their MDWs' salaries or having employees seeking to borrow money, or constantly asking for salary increases. As indicated by survey data, it is notable that providing loans, bonuses or salary increases was not a concern or source of conflict for a significant proportion of employers.

"I realised that I made a mistake by getting a Hong Kong Island helper, and that's why she was asking for more money. She was not happy because she had 5 kids, and she didn't think HK$5,000 was enough for her." ***(interview #12)***

"The previous issue was about financial difficulties, which might have led to advance her salary. These advances were frequent, occurring every month." ***(interview #15)***

Most of the above accounts align with Ladegaard's (2017) research on employer-MDW narratives, which documents how employers often attribute conflicts to MDWs' perceived incompetence or cultural differences rather than to structural inequalities. The power dynamics in these narratives and attributions reveal "manufactured differences"—employers' tendency to emphasise cultural and behavioural differences to justify their own control and disciplinary mechanisms of their MDWs.

e) Family Member Conflicts

Residing within the family household, MDWs contribute to wider family dynamics and relationships. Therefore, conflict and tension were also determined by broader household and family dynamics.

"The main challenges come from my mother, who often criticises the domestic worker. We have to pretend in front of the worker, saying, 'Grandma doesn't like this,' and coordinate behind the scenes to reassure my mother that we value her opinions." ***(interview #2)***

"I see a lot of like when children are coming up to school and they're running ahead and then they turn around and yell at their helper and criticise them for being so slow when the helper is carrying like two school bags and like four lunches." ***(interview #2)***

Meanwhile, a few employers reported conflicts among family members stemming from different relationships with their MDWs, highlighting how the management of MDWs can directly affect family dynamics.

"Our first helper and I got along really well. I think my wife was jealous of that. Finally, if my wife was doing something I didn't like, I could complain to somebody. And it turns out that was a bad idea." ***(interview #4)***

4.5.3 Conflict Resolution Strategies & Violence

When conflicts arise between employers and MDWs, they are often addressed through dialogue, efforts to adapt working arrangements, or by providing additional resources. In some cases, conflicts lead to punitive measures or the termination of the MDWs' contracts.

a). Discussion and Communication

Many employers initially attempted to resolve issues through discussion with their MDWs, avoiding violence or harsh language. They often sought to understand the MDWs' perspectives before taking further action.

"She certainly has her own opinions. When she expresses them, I am willing to listen and discuss them with her. After our conversation, we all agreed on the approach to take. It's not about me imposing my will on her; rather, it's about her feeling heard and satisfied with the outcome. Even if she initially expressed dissatisfaction, she is usually open to accepting the decision once we have talked it through." ***(interview #1)***

"I have to speak slowly because I'm used to speaking quickly and getting things done fast. I try to slow down for her." ***(interview #4)***

According to Ho & Sewell (2023), when it comes to negotiating power in domestic employment, discussions ostensibly aimed at resolving conflicts and enhancing mutual understanding can sometimes still reinforce employer authority.

b). Adaptation and Accommodation

Employers also adapted to their MDWs by assigning tasks within their capabilities and reducing their expectations, fostering a more manageable and harmonious working relationship.

"We're trying to play to her strengths, giving her something that she can do." ***(interview #6)***

"I didn't dare offend her and just tried to get by as if nothing was wrong." ***(interview #11)***

These reported adaptation strategies align with Ozeki's (1997) observation that successful employer-MDW relationships eventually stabilise into quasi-familial bonds that ease significant employment tensions while maintaining subtle domestic power hierarchies.

c). Providing Resources and Training

After discussing or clarifying the MDWs' mistakes, employers typically provided resources or offered guidance on important skills and knowledge that MDWs should learn or understand.

"I told her to learn on her own from YouTube. I gave her a YouTube video, and she was able to make it. It turned out really well." ***(interview #1)***

"Trying to teach her to do certain things that align with me and my wife's expectations." ***(interview #6)***

One employer reported that they provided bonuses and incentives to motivate their MDW, encouraging them to be more responsible and to perform their duties more efficiently.

"My mother previously said she was irresponsible and dishonest when buying groceries. After analysing the situation, we decided to give the domestic worker an extra HK$100 as pocket money to buy things she likes, and after that, there were no more conflicts." ***(interview #2)***

d). Punishment, Discipline, and Violence

Sometimes, the punishment and discipline escalated to violence. In order to measure conflict management strategies and violence, we incorporated a Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) within the survey. The scale measures the use of nonviolent discipline, psychological aggression and physical assault. Since the scale was originally created for familial relationships, we adapted the measures to apply to the employee-domestic worker context. Our final scale included measures of reasoning, non-violent punishment, psychological aggression, minor physical assault and severe physical assault. Prior data suggests that 1 in 6 domestic workers (18%) may be physically abused, indicating that our data may be an underreport, as the prevalence rate was 4.9%. This underreporting may have been due to bias within the random sampling of survey participants or a reluctance to self-report among employers. Other estimates of violence were collected from domestic workers themselves, which could be a reason for a higher reporting rate.

The survey measured multiple different forms of violence as captured by the CTS. The respective rates of each individual type of violence were as follows:

Table 3: Violence Prevalence Rates

Type of Violence Perpetrated	Prevalence Rate (%)
Slapped domestic worker	3.6%
Punched or kicked domestic worker	3.9%
Beat domestic worker	3.6%
Hit domestic worker with something	3.6%
Threw something at domestic worker	3.3%
Pushed or shoved domestic worker	3.6%

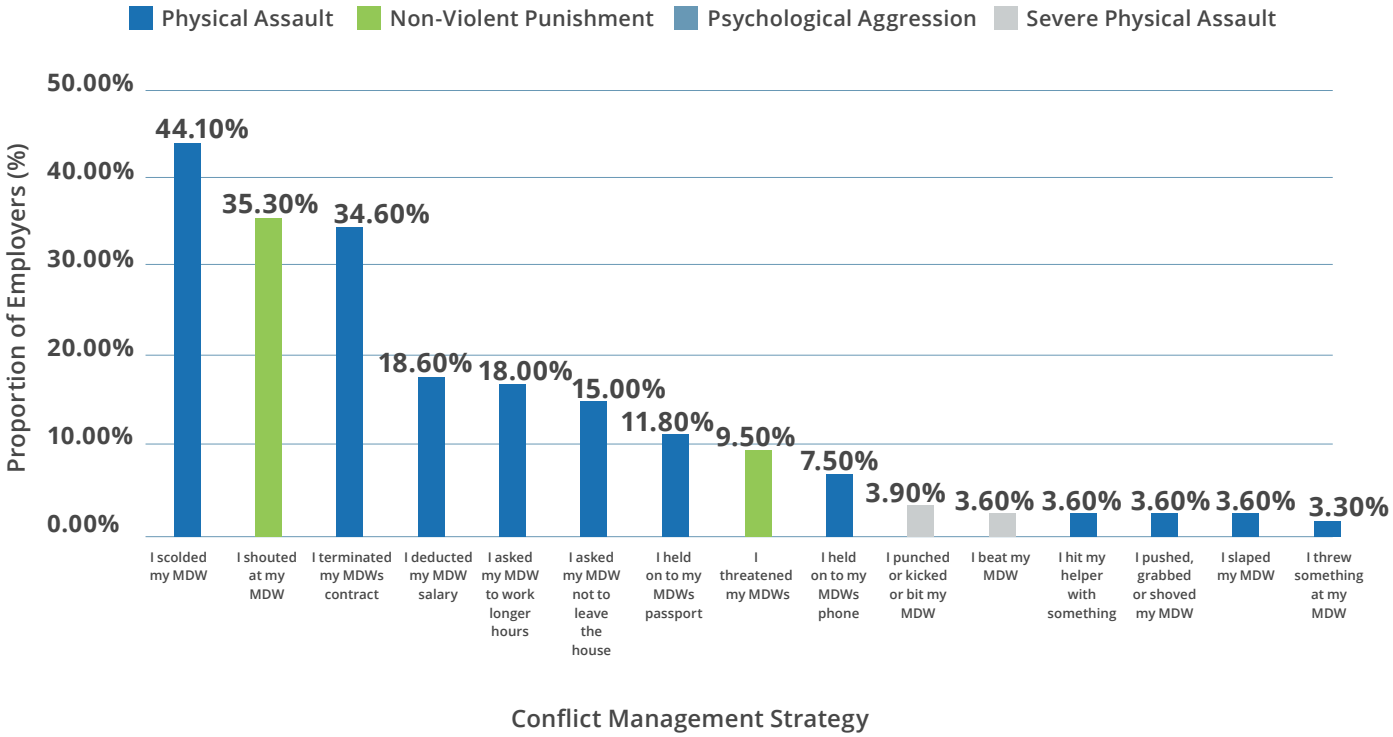
The rates and findings align with the results of Cheung et al.'s (2019) cross-sectional survey, which document significant rates of facing abuse among Filipino MDWs in Hong Kong, and Lai & Fong's (2020) findings that nearly 4% of MDWs in Hong Kong have experienced being hit by employers.

In addition to violence, the CTS measured other forms of psychological aggression and negative conflict management techniques that were reported to a much higher degree. Psychological aggression was reported by a significant proportion of employers in response to conflict. Most common was scolding, which nearly half of all respondents (44.1%) reported. Verbal abuse, or shouting at their domestic worker, was reported by over a third of respondents (35.3%), while 9.5% reported threatening their domestic worker in response to conflict. This corresponds with Ho et al.'s (2022) observation that some Hong Kong employers view MDWs simultaneously as

household workers expected to provide round-the-clock services and as female caregivers obligated to offer "motherly" emotional care—dual expectations that often lead to verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse and unreasonable workloads.

Other forms of punishment in response to conflict involved restricting domestic workers' access to communications, their personal documents or freedom of movement and imposing financial penalties or excessive work. Most common was imposing salary deductions (18.6%), asking domestic workers to work overtime (18%), preventing them from leaving the house (15%), or confiscating their passport (11.8%) or mobile phone (7.5%) **(Figure 17)**.

Figure 17: Negative Conflict Management Strategies Reported by Employers



This data is reinforced by qualitative insights from in-depth interviews, where some employers openly admitted to arguing with MDWs and using punishment as a method of discipline.

> *"I believe that we are fair in our rewards and punishments; if there's a mistake, I will point it out. From her perspective, I think she will understand this principle or method. To be effective, it must be targeted at her work."* ***(interview #10)***

Gendered Impacts

Across multiple indicators, men were somewhat more likely than women to report various forms of exploitation, impose restrictions and engage in disciplinary actions. Specifically, men were 13% more likely to report restricting MDWs from leaving the house and 11% more likely to report verbal abuse. They were also roughly 7% more likely than women to report confiscation of mobile phones, retention of passports, and asking MDWs to work longer hours. Men were marginally more likely to report instances of threats, slapping, punching, kicking, or throwing objects; however, these differences fall within the margin of error and are likely not statistically significant.

Household Income

Conflict practices among middle-income households differ notably from other income groups. Middle-income households were 30% more likely than high-income households to deduct their MDWs' salaries as punishment and were also more likely to withhold passports, with 25% of households in the 60,000–99,999 HKD income bracket reporting this practice. They were the most likely to hold onto MDWs' phones (14% more than high-income households) and to restrict MDWs' freedom of movement, with 30% asking their MDWs not to leave the house. Middle-income households were 17-18% more likely to use verbal abuse in conflicts and to ask MDWs to work overtime. Additionally, they were marginally more likely (12%) to resort to threats to manage conflicts. While low and middle-income households were marginally more likely to report physical violence, the small sample size limits definitive conclusions; no reports of violence were recorded in the highest income bracket.

e). Contract Termination

If the conflict could not be solved or could not be tolerated, the last resort for employers was simply to terminate the employment contract of the MDW, which was reported by over a third of our survey's respondents (34.6%). This was significantly more common among employers who reported exploitation, almost half of whom had terminated their MDWs' contract (46.6%).

> *"The helper had a bad attitude, didn't work unless yelled at, and acted like she was on vacation in Hong Kong. It was extreme. She didn't do housework well, didn't follow instructions, and was lazy. They fired her in two days. Yes, and if my MDW borrows money in Hong Kong, I'd fire her immediately."* ***(interview #14)***

> *"We talked with her and said, please stop this kind of thing. We'd much rather you come to us than to a loan shark. And then a few months later another letter arrived and it wasn't our helper who hadn't broken it off, it was the other friend, but because they still had her address coming in. So my wife made it clear that because of this we're not going to renew the MDW's contract."* ***(interview #4)***

It seems that when describing contract termination decisions, employers often invoked what Cheung & Mok (1998) identified as "bad attitude," "problematic behaviours," and "poor quality of work/service" narratives that attribute the major faults and responsibilities to MDWs while obscuring the structural disadvantages MDWs might face in Hong Kong society.

MDWs, however, may not have been quitting their jobs at the same rate as employers have been terminating their contracts, as only one quarter of employers reported that a current or former MDW had broken a contract prematurely. MDWs may not have the same freedom to break contracts in exploitative situations, as a result of Immigration job-hopping policies, which penalise these workers by denying future employment visas.

4.6. Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

4.6.1. Factors & Barriers Hindering Ethical Employment

Our qualitative data reveals complex challenges faced by employers of MDWs in Hong Kong, spanning financial concerns, legal uncertainties, and other structural and systematic issues.

a). The Role of Financial Barriers

The study sought to uncover factors that may have been related to exploitative employment practices. The data indicate that financial strain may be an important factor, as employers reporting exploitation were almost twice as likely to report that hiring domestic workers was expensive for them (42.6%). That said, only a minority (8.4%) of employers reported having inadequate financial resources to support their domestic worker. Access to adequate space to accommodate a domestic worker was not a significant concern, as only 11% of employers reported this. Low-income households were disproportionately affected, reporting a lack of financial resources to accommodate workers and pay salaries at a significantly higher rate.

Financial considerations also emerged as a prominent concern for employers during qualitative interviews. Several interviewees highlighted the burden of various costs beyond the basic employment salary, including agency fees, flight expenses, and long service payments. Some employers perceived the government's regular salary increases for MDWs as unjustified, creating financial strain, particularly for middle-class Hong Kong families. There was also frustration about wealthy employers inflating salaries above the minimum wage, making it harder for middle-class employers to compete against them in the process of hiring MDWs.

> *"There is pressure. The most expensive part is the agency's fee, and secondly, there's a lack of guarantees. Think about it—if she works for a day and you don't like her, if you fire her, you have to pay the agency's fee again. This is my biggest concern after hiring workers for so long. It's like gambling; sometimes workers really mess up, you fire them, and then you lose money."* ***(Interview #1)***

> *"One significant reason was that after about six years, there's a long service payment. My parents felt that with the household expenses, even though they could afford the domestic worker's salary, the additional long service payment made it seem not worth it to keep her, so they opted for a new one."* ***(Interview #3)***

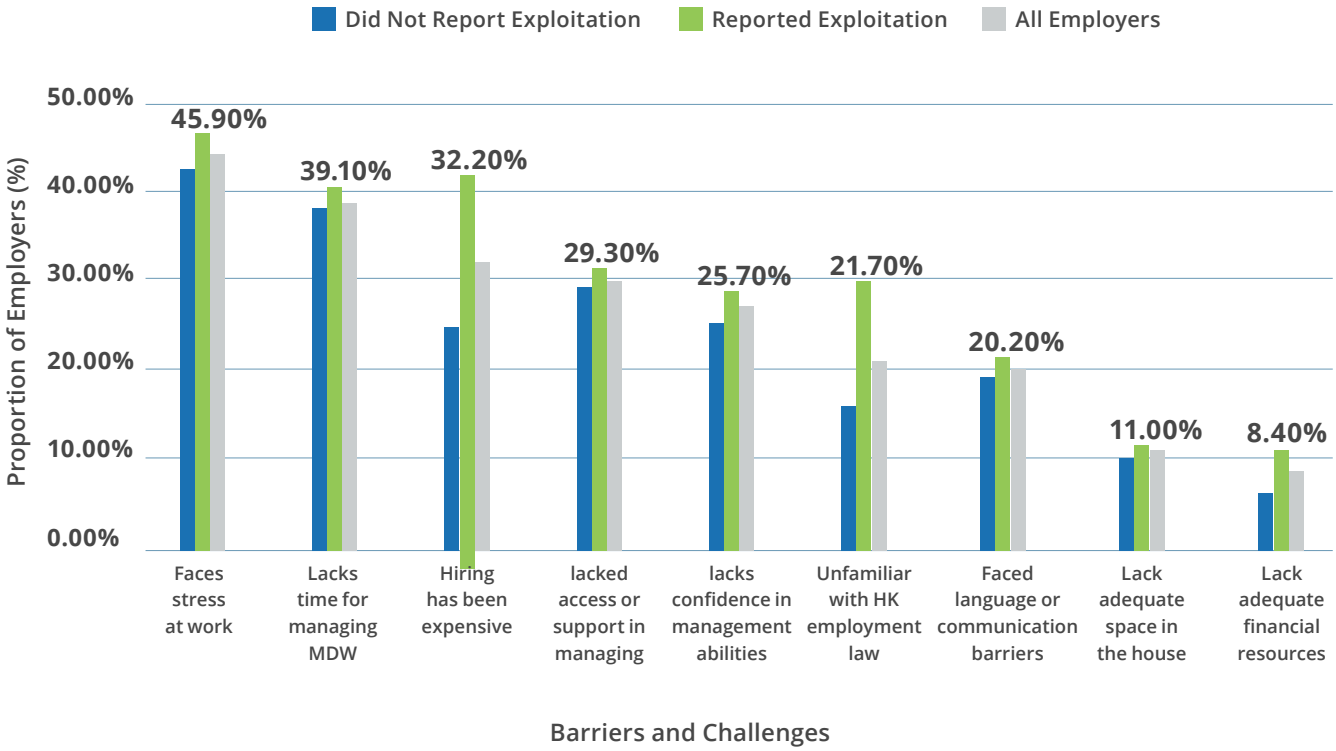
> *"I raised this concern with the Labour Department when there was a salary revision... The inflation is too high these days... I want someone to take care of my child, and I'm already having all of this financial burden on top of my head, and then the salary wages are increasing..."* ***(Interview #9)***

According to Liang (2016), MDWs are explicitly excluded from statutory minimum wage provisions in Hong Kong, often receiving less than half the statutory minimum wage, which creates further tensions between employers' financial burdens and concerns and MDWs' fundamental economic rights as employees.

b). Legal Challenges & Knowledge Gaps

A lack of knowledge of employment laws may also have been associated with exploitation, as employers who exploited workers were 15% more likely to report that they were unfamiliar with Hong Kong employment laws. Employers who were more ethical also reported a higher level of confidence in their own ability to manage their domestic worker (53.1%), as compared to employers who reported exploitation, who were more likely to lack confidence (38.3%). In addition, high-income households may have had better knowledge of employment laws, correlating with fairer employment practices, as reported rates were 30% higher than low-income households. Consequently, higher-income households were also three times as likely to report being confident in their ability to manage their domestic worker. Higher rates of confidence may also have mirrored fairer employment practices.

Figure 18: Key Barriers and Management Challenges Faced by Employers Disaggregated by Reported Exploitation



During qualitative interviews, many employers also expressed uncertainty about their legal responsibilities and rights when employing MDWs. This included confusion about the proper actions to take when workers fall ill, the legality of surveillance cameras, the regulations regarding days off, and the handling of pregnancy-related situations. As noted by Paul & Neo (2017), employers' limited legal knowledge often leads them to unjustly restrict MDWs' rights, particularly the rights regarding reproductive autonomy. Some employers explicitly admitted to limited knowledge of employment laws and relied heavily on employment agencies for information, which potentially leaves them vulnerable to misinformation or exploitation.

> *"I'm not very familiar with the laws that can protect my rights. I only know I need to follow the contract. It's my only knowledge. So I'm barely familiar with the employment law and regulations."* ***(Interview #5)***

"My helper hasn't had any health issues so far. However, if she does get sick, we often ask many helpers how they should handle it, whether to go to a public or private hospital, and not many people have experience in these matters" ***(Interview #7)***

"I'm wondering if not giving her a day off is OK. I feel like it's exploiting her, but if she doesn't take days off, it's not my problem. Even in Hong Kong, you need days off, right? I'm not sure if there's an issue." ***(Interview #14)***

c). Mismatched Expectations & Lack of Trust

Employers who exploited their domestic workers were reportedly frustrated by their domestic workers' skills or work ethic, as nearly half **(48.8%)** reported having domestic workers who did not understand instructions as a challenge, as compared to **29.7%** of other employers. Employers that exploited were also twice as likely to report that domestic workers lacked the needed skills for the job **(30%)**, and significantly more likely to report having domestic workers who were unmotivated or lazy **(37%)**. A fifth of employers also reported facing language barriers or having trouble communicating with their domestic workers.

The study sought to uncover factors leading to the breakdown of employment relationships and barriers to ethical employment. Employers who exploited their domestic workers may have lacked trust in domestic workers, as roughly **a fifth** reported that domestic workers had been irresponsible with their children or elderly family members, twice as likely when compared with other employers. This aligns with the concept of "otherness" described by Niyomsilpa & Sunpuwan (2014), where host society members experience a detachment from migrant communities due to strong national identity, leading to mistrust and negative stereotyping.

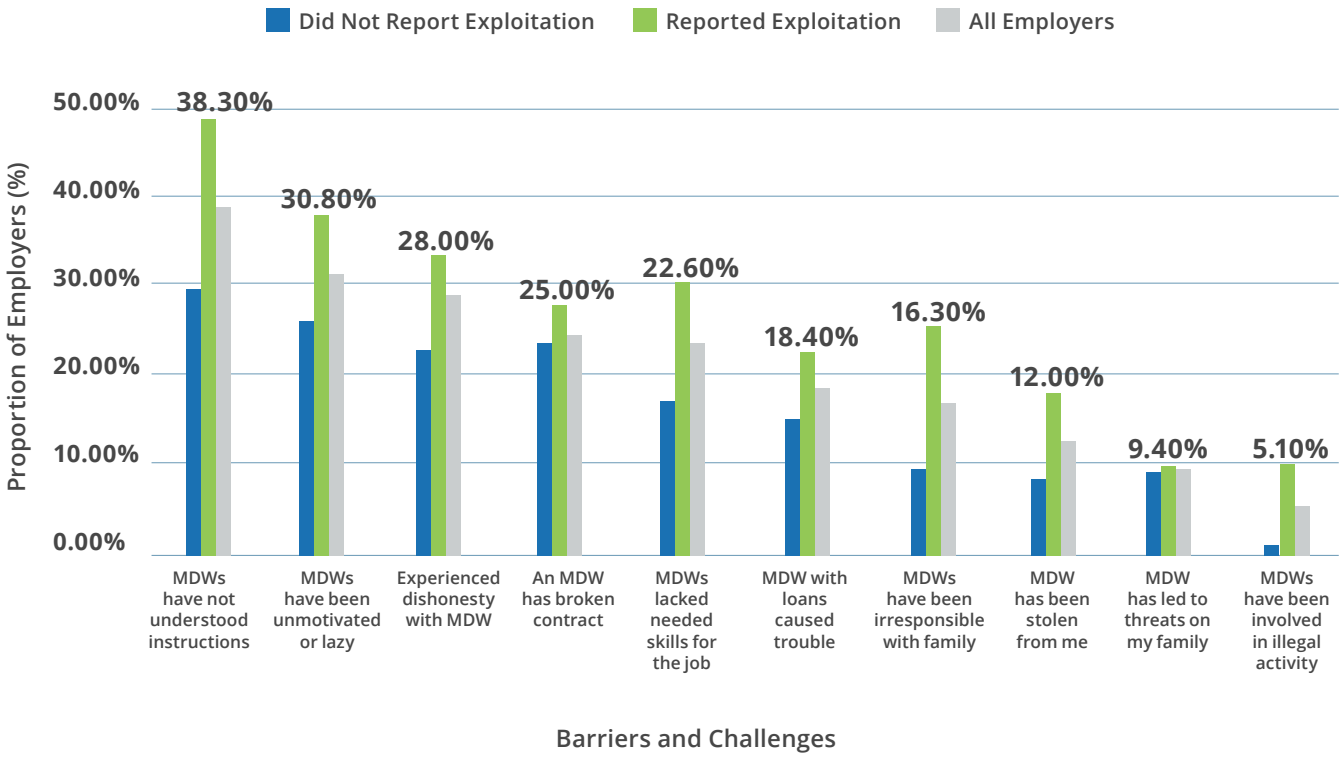
Employers who exploited domestic workers also reported certain negative employment experiences at a comparatively higher rate, such as having a domestic worker who was dishonest **(33.8%)**, stole from them **(17.2%)**, or was involved in illegal activity **(9.8%)**. Security issues were another challenge, as roughly **one in ten** employers reported that a domestic worker's actions had led to threats on their family members.

d). Managing Pregnancies, Crises & Unmet Expectations

In crisis situations, employers may lack knowledge on how to respond, which leads to a rapid breakdown in the employment relationship. Employers expressed confusion around policies and guidelines relating to MDW pregnancies and contract termination procedures, calling upon the government to legislate to provide clearer guidelines. A small proportion of employers **(18.4%)** reported having domestic helpers who had issues with loans from money lenders, which caused them trouble, but also may have lacked guidance on what to do in such a scenario.

"Plus, if a worker becomes pregnant, how should that be handled? She might already be pregnant when she arrives in Hong Kong, but it's not something that can be detected during a medical check since it may be too early... This is fundamentally an issue for the government to legislate. When a worker finds herself in this situation, what should be done?" ***(Interview #1)***

Figure 19: Challenges with MDWs as Reported by Employers, Disaggregated by Reported Exploitation



In instances where expectations went unmet or crisis situations arose, employers mentioned being frustrated with the lack of guarantees in the hiring process and difficulty in finding suitable replacements. The absence of a probation period was cited as particularly problematic, as employers felt compelled to commit to workers without adequate assessment time. COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges by limiting hiring options and prolonging contractual procedures.

> *"This is a bit of a headache because there aren't many guarantees. If the worker is good, it's fine, but when they misbehave, the employer gets worried... I think there should at least be a probation period."* ***(Interview #1)***

> *"I have to show patience in these situations because I really don't want to change helpers. It's a hassle to switch again when I don't know what kind of person I'll get next."* ***(Interview #11)***

> *"Back in last year, because of the COVID situation, the choices of helpers were very limited...we don't have much options to swap the helper if I find the current one unsuitable."* ***(Interview #5)***

Interestingly, the lack of flexibility in hiring processes and employment policies is a problem that also plagues MDWs. The Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions (2022) notes that unreasonable immigration policies, including the inflexible "two-week rule" requiring MDWs to secure new contracts within two weeks of unemployment, force MDWs to endure abusive treatment for fear of losing jobs and being unable to find alternatives.

e). Stress, Adequate Time & Access to Support Resources

Employers in general reported facing stress at work, as reported by nearly half of all participants (45.9%). It was hypothesised that stress may impact the likelihood of exploitation; however, there did not appear to be any major difference between groups. This challenges and complicates the results of PathFinders' (2024) research, which claim that many Hong Kongers work long hours and struggle with work-life balance, subsequently bringing workplace stress back into their homes and displacing it onto MDWs by abusing and exploiting their MDWs.

Another factor that was a commonly reported challenge for employers was having insufficient time to manage their domestic worker, as 39.1% reported that having limited time was a concern. Nearly a third of employers may have felt that they lacked access to support services for managing their domestic workers, with women significantly more likely (22.8%) to report this than men. Women overall were more likely to report having sufficient time, while men were more indifferent, suggesting that females took on more MDW managerial responsibilities. High-income households were also twice as likely to have enough time to manage domestic workers as low-income households, suggesting that low-income households may face additional strain.

4.6.2. Critiques of Government Policy

Several employers criticised existing policies as unfavourable to employers, particularly those policies regarding MDW pregnancies, contract termination procedures, and the live-in rule. Some felt the laws were tilted in favour of workers rather than employers, while others expressed deeper ethical concerns about the Hong Kong legal system itself, questioning the problematic power dynamics and the harsh living conditions imposed on MDWs.

> *"I think the laws help helpers instead of employers... I think I should say that the law is tilted more on their side in their favour than in the favour of [employers]."* ***(Interview #12)***

> *"You also have to get used to having someone in your house to live with you, regardless of your feelings on the live-in rule. And you need to provide space. I felt quite upset when I visited some other friends' flats, and they're like, here's the room for our helper. And it's just like, this is smaller than a bathtub. How can someone live here?"* ***(Interview #4)***

> *"The minimum salary is too low for someone who is basically on call 24 hours a day. This is a job that's normally taken by emergency staff."* ***(Interview #4)***

Others criticised government policies as exploitative, suboptimal, or failing to address core social issues. Some expatriate employers were particularly critical, viewing the employment system as morally questionable, especially regarding the live-in rule and the inability of MDWs to obtain permanent residency. This echoes concerns raised by international researchers. As noted by Constable (2015), MDWs face significant "obstacles to claiming rights" and permanent residency even in Hong Kong, which is often presented as "Asia's World City."

On the other hand, other employers criticised the Hong Kong government for seemingly prioritising MDWs' interests over those of employers, particularly regarding salary increases without corresponding support for employers.

"I think some of the people in charge don't really see why they have to treat helpers as human beings. Because I cannot think of any other job where you're forced to live with your employer and be on call 24 hours a day for a small salary, and don't qualify for permanent residency." ***(Interview #4)***

"They keep increasing the MDWs' salary. But they've frozen everyone else's salary. But then the government themselves are increasing the salary of the helper." ***(Interview #12)***

4.6.3. Suggested Areas of Support

The interviews also highlight employers' varied perspectives on necessary support structures and regulatory improvements.

a). Education for MDWs

Several employers advocated for mandatory training for MDWs to ensure they possess the necessary skills and understand their responsibilities. Suggestions included government oversight of training standards and proper education by employment agencies about appropriate conduct, particularly conduct regarding financial matters such as borrowing money.

"The government can think of some ways to make sure that all domestic helpers are well-trained to be up to standard." ***(Interview #5)***

"Perhaps the agencies could explain things to the MDWs and could teach them not to borrow money using their employers' addresses; and also, no matter whether it's black market work or other things, they should not get involved." ***(Interview #8)***

"There needs to be a regulatory agency to oversee [the MDWs]... Both the government and the agency should oversee it." ***(Interview #11)***

b). Better Educational and Emergency Resources for Employers

Employers expressed a need for access to better educational resources so that they could better understand their legal obligations and manage emergencies. Suggestions included that the Hong Kong government should enforce mandatory training for employers, provide accessible information about employers' rights and responsibilities, create an emergency hotline for employers, and open forums for employers to share experiences and support one another.

"I would say that you would have to take maybe like a one-hour mandatory course offered by the Labour Department on the rights and responsibilities of an employer." ***(Interview #4)***

"If a domestic worker falls ill or sustains an injury during work, or if an accident occurs, a hotline to contact the government would be beneficial. Similar to 999, providing support." ***(Interview #10)***

"The last time I called the Labor Department, I asked them, do you have a forum? Do you have an expat forum or an English forum?... So these kinds of forums can actually help us to talk more to employers who need to come out with their views." ***(Interview #9)***

c). Better and More Effective Regulations on Migration Intermediaries

overcharging, inadequate worker training, and insufficient transparency. Suggestions included government oversight of agency practices and the establishment of clear standards for worker preparation and placement by agencies.

"I think there should be laws to regulate those employment agencies to ensure that the domestic helpers [provided by them] are legal. At least these helpers should be well-trained to be able to manage taking care of the households. I think it will be better if there are better regulations [on employment agencies]." ***(Interview #5)***

d). Stricter Regulations of MDWs

Some employers also advocated for stricter rules governing MDWs' behaviours, particularly regarding matters such as contract breaking, pregnancy, and financial borrowing. Suggestions included deportation for contract-breaking workers, pregnancy testing before employment begins, and restrictions on MDWs' freedom to borrow money.

"If a helper breaks the contract, she should be sent back right away. She shouldn't get the opportunity to find another employer, but if she's being terminated by the employer, then she should have the right to find another employment." ***(Interview #12)***

"Clear regulations need to be established. For example, if someone borrows a certain amount of money, it should be illegal. But right now, it's actually legal for domestic helpers to borrow money, regardless of the amount. The problem is they don't have the ability to pay it back, and their financial literacy is very poor." ***(Interview #15)***

The data indicate that a substantial portion of employers may engage in exploitative behaviours. The suggestion of direct deportations for MDWs who break contracts is likely to put workers at higher risk of forced labour, by encouraging them not to leave an exploitative employment situation even if they are at risk.

e). Financial Aid for MDWs/Employers

Employers further suggested various forms of financial support, including tax relief for employers, concession cards for MDWs for transportation and food, and government subsidies to manage certain situations, such as when workers become pregnant or need to return home for emergencies.

"It would be great if employers could get some tax relief." ***(Interview #2)***

"They have to spend more on their travel and food, so probably they can be given a card or something where they could have some subsidised food. There needs to be a subsidised transportation system, instead of putting the burden on employers by raising MDWs' salaries." ***(Interview #9)***

f). Improved Protections for MDWs/Employers

Finally, employers recognised the need for better protections for both parties. This included improved living conditions for MDWs, protection from mistreatment, and support for employers during emergencies like contract disruptions.

"They should be provided with a basic, acceptable living space. I've heard of some instances where the sleeping or living conditions for helpers are quite poor." ***(Interview #7)***

"We hope to have protections for employers, and at the same time, helpers also need protection. The protection for helpers mainly involves ensuring that employers do not mistreat them verbally or physically, which is fundamental." ***(Interview #7)***

Overall, employers' suggestions and policy recommendations reflect what Cheah (2022) has identified as a critical need for the government to actively and proactively scrutinise the existing laws and policies that tolerate or even facilitate the abuse of both employers and MDWs, rather than viewing these individuals' vulnerabilities as fixed and unchangeable conditions.

Still waters reflect the calm after the day's motion. © Photo by Taso Katsionis - Unsplash

Section 5: Conclusions

This study aimed to understand the complex factors that shape employer perceptions, attitudes, and employment practices toward migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Hong Kong. Through a mixed-methods approach encompassing survey data from 306 employers and in-depth interviews with 15 participants, our research provides novel insights into the employer experience and the drivers of both ethical and exploitative employment behaviours. The findings directly address our four key research questions and offer important implications for policy and behavioural change interventions.

The study reveals that employer perceptions of MDWs are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, creating a complex landscape where positive recognition coexists with persistent stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes. **Economic factors** emerged as particularly influential, with low-income households more likely than high-income households to believe that MDWs lie and steal, as well as to view MDWs as carrying unknown diseases. **Cultural and nationality-based factors** also significantly influence employer perceptions, with clear evidence of racialised stereotyping. In addition, **gender** also shapes perceptions. Female employers demonstrated stronger positive sentiment toward MDWs and a greater likelihood of considering MDWs as family members. However, women also reported slightly higher frustration levels, possibly reflecting their closer emotional bonds and greater managerial responsibilities. Finally, **social norms** play a crucial role, with employers who do not exploit their workers more likely to perceive that others in their social circle have good relationships with their MDWs.

The study also establishes clear connections between employer attitudes and employment practices. Most significantly, **42.8% of employers reported engaging in at least one exploitative practice**, including threats, violence, document confiscation, or denial of rest days. The relationship between attitudes and practices is particularly evident in the finding that employers reporting exploitation were significantly more likely to distrust their MDWs, believe workers should focus solely on work, and expect complete obedience. These controlling attitudes directly translate into restrictive and harmful employment practices.

Income level emerged as a critical factor, with middle-income households (HKD 60,000-99,999 monthly) most likely to engage in exploitative practices. **Living space constraints** also influence practices. Nearly half of exploitative employers resided in apartments under 752 square feet, compared to 36.6% of ethical employers.

In addition, our analysis reveals how employers draw upon various justification strategies. **Economic justifications** are particularly prominent, with employers citing financial constraints, agency fees, and salary increases as sources of stress that influence their treatment of workers. **Cultural attribution** serves as another justification mechanism—some employers attributed conflicts and problems to MDWs' nationality, education level, or cultural background. **Skills and competence narratives** also frequently emerge in employer accounts, with those reporting exploitation significantly more likely to cite issues with worker understanding, lack of needed skills, and unmotivation.

Multiple structural and personal barriers hinder ethical employment practices. **Financial constraints** represent a primary challenge, with 42.6% of exploitative employers reporting that hiring MDWs is expensive. Additionally, **the absence of probation periods, inflexible immigration policies, and**

limited support resources further create **systemic pressures** that can push employers toward exploitative practices. **Legal knowledge gaps** constitute another significant barrier—exploitative employers were more likely to report unfamiliarity with Hong Kong employment laws. Finally, additional **structural factors**, including the mandatory live-in rule, restricted mobility for MDWs, and MDWs' limited pathways to Hong Kong's permanent residency, create an inherently unequal power dynamic that facilitates exploitation even among well-intentioned employers.

Several sampling challenges limit the generalizability of our findings. The gender imbalance in our sample reflects the reality that women typically manage domestic workers, but it limits our ability to understand the perspectives of male employers. Furthermore, our sample may be skewed toward more educated, higher-income employers who were willing to participate in research, potentially underrepresenting the experiences of those lower-income households that also exploit MDWs. The relatively small proportion of low-income households in our sample restricts our understanding of how economic constraints specifically affect employer behaviours among the most financially vulnerable employers.

Our finding of 4.9% physical violence prevalence is lower than the 18% rate found in studies that directly interviewed MDWs, suggesting significant social desirability bias in employer responses. The reluctance of employers reporting violence in the survey to participate in follow-up interviews further hindered our attempt to understand the most serious forms of abuse and violence in employment relationships.

Several areas require future research and investigation. **More extensive qualitative research** with employers who report violent or highly exploitative practices is needed to better understand the psychological and social factors that enable severe abuse. This research should prioritise recruitment strategies that better capture the perspectives and opinions of employers across the full gender and economic spectrum, rather than simply focusing on female and middle or high-income employers.

In addition, **intervention research** is particularly needed to test the effectiveness of different approaches to promoting ethical employment behaviours. Our findings suggest that targeted interventions addressing legal knowledge, financial constraints, and cultural competency could be beneficial, but empirical testing is required.

The complexity of factors influencing employer behaviours toward MDWs underscores the need for multifaceted approaches to promoting ethical employment practices. While this study provides important baseline insights into employer perspectives, addressing the challenges facing MDWs will further require sustained research, policy reform, and targeted interventions that recognise the structural nature of many employment problems while also carefully paying attention to individual employers' attitudes and concerns.

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Annex 1 Survey Questionnaire

Barriers: We would like to better understand the challenges that you face as an employers of a domestic helper in HK. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

CTS: Foreign domestic helpers often make mistakes, which can lead to disagreements with employers. In the past year, how did you manage conflict with your domestic helper? The following is a list of things you might have done in the past year, or before, to manage conflict. Please indicate how many times each of these has happened

Demographic Data & Closing

Age	: What is your age?
Gender	: What is your gender?
Occupation	: What is your employment status?
Income Bracket	: What is your monthly household income (in HKD)?
FDH Salary	: What is the salary of your domestic helper (in HKD)?
Education Level	: What is your highest level of education?
Nationality	: What is your country/territory of citizenship?
Marital Status	: What is your marital status?
Contact Number	: Please provide your contact number?
Paymend Mode	: We offer HK$100 cash incentives to all participants as token of gratitude. If you wish to receive it, what is you preferred payment method?
Payment Number	: What is your registered email or phone/account number for payment transfer?
In Depth Consent	: Do you consent to being contacted for follow up in-depth interview?

Annex 2: In-Depth Interview Guide

Participants will be reminded that participation is voluntary and that they do not have to take part if they do not wish to. As per the Informed Consent Form, they will also be reminded that they can elect not to respond to a particular question and that they are free to take a break or bring the interview to an end at any time. In the event of any distress, participants will be encouraged to seek assistance by contacting a support service.

Participants will be given an Informed Consent Form or be read out an Informed Consent Script prior to the interview, and they will need to sign and return a consent form or provide verbal consent which will be recorded, before the commencement of a Face to Face or online interview. Participants will be reminded that data will be de-identified and not to disclose the identities of others in the interview. With the participant's permission, the interview will be audio-recorded.

Introduction: Can you please tell us about yourself and your domestic helper? (focusing on Participant information)

1. How long have you been employing a domestic helper? Where is your helper from? What are her responsibilities? What are her aims and goals in life? (Probe: To understand what their relationship is like with their domestic helper, how much do they know about their personal life).

2. Can you walk me through a typical day for your domestic helper? What about a typical week? What is her weekly schedule?

Theme One: Factors (societal norms, cultural, structural, economic) influencing employers' perceptions of migrant domestic helpers in Hong Kong SAR

1. What do most of your friends and family, and broader society in Hong Kong think about foreign domestic helpers? What is their impact on society here? What are their attitudes towards domestic helpers? Can you think of some examples?

2. What are your personal beliefs and perceptions about foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong? Can you elaborate on how your views developed over time?

3. What specific experiences or influences have shaped your perspective on foreign domestic helpers? Can you please share these experiences with us?

Theme Two: Factors and attitudes influencing employment practices of employers

1. Could you please share a detailed account of your experiences employing and living with a domestic helper? What specific positive and negative situations have you encountered?

2. Are there any specific behaviours, approaches to work, or cultural differences that you find challenging when managing your domestic helper? How are they different from people from Hong Kong? How have you managed to work with them?

3. Reflecting on your past experiences with foreign domestic helpers, what do you think influences their behaviours and attitudes towards their work? (Probe: ask about religious, cultural background or ethnicity, tendencies of domestic workers to be more difficult to deal with)

4. Have you encountered any challenges in communicating with or managing your foreign domestic helpers? Could you share these experiences with us, and how you dealt with them? Why did you choose this approach to manage that situation?

5. What is your philosophy on managing foreign domestic helpers? Do you lean towards a more strict or lenient approach? Why do you feel this is the most effective approach? How have you managed any conflicts that have come up while employing a foreign domestic helper?

Theme Three: Factors and barriers hindering healthy employment practices

1. What other challenges do you face in meeting all your obligations as an employer of a foreign domestic worker? Do you ever find it difficult to cope? What are the reasons for this?

2. Are you aware of any legal responsibilities of employers towards domestic workers? If so, how did you learn about these? Do you find them challenging to implement? Could you share some reasons why? (Probe: If not in your personal experience, what about among your family and friends? Where do you think there is room for improvement?)

3. How could you be better supported to manage your foreign domestic helper? What resources, changes, or support could help to improve the situation with your domestic helper? What do you wish you could change to make the lives of employers easier? (Probe: Are you facing this with your current domestic helper?)

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